The New Criterion

March 1995

A monthly review *edited by Hilton Kramer*

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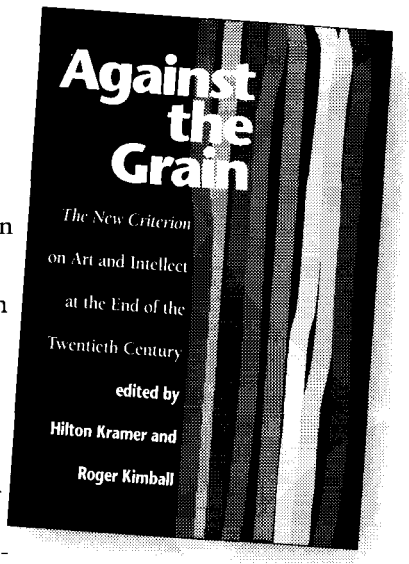
Against the Grain

The New Criterion on Art and Intellect at the End of the Twentieth Century

edited by Hilton Kramer and Roger Kimball



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The New Criterion *March 1995*

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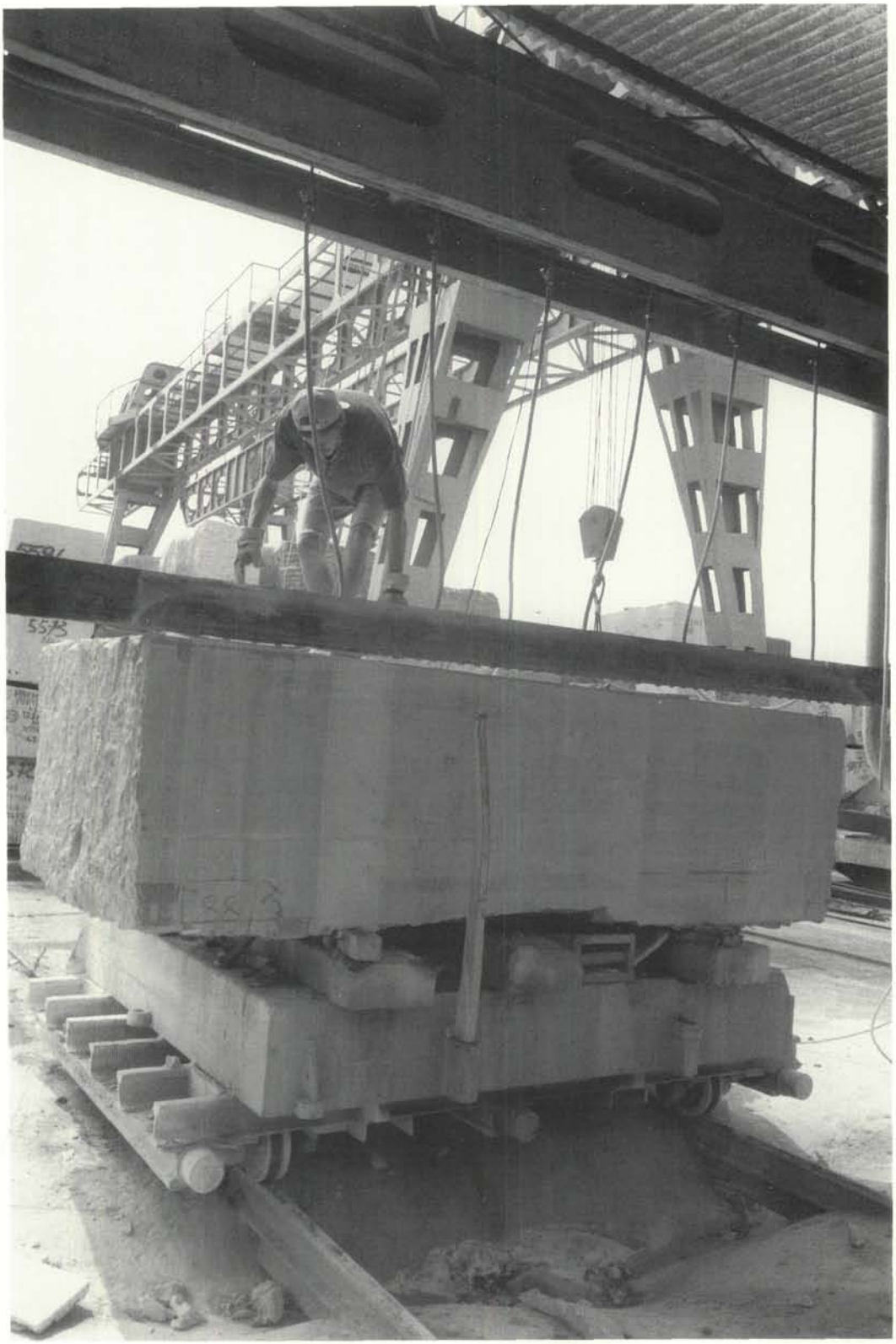

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Notes & Comments: March 1995

Pop goes Parnassus

In the vast compendium of metaphysical problems, the question of how many angels can dance on the head of a pin has been at least temporarily supplanted by the question of how bad *The New York Times Magazine* can get. This problem has less relevance to daily life than the one about angels, but for connoisseurs of fatuousness the spectacle of the *Times Magazine* imploding does provide a certain grisly fascination. Week in and week out, always a bit worse. How do they do it? Is there a special team of editorial surgeons that goes to work on each article, ruthlessly extracting every trace of intellectual substance before publication? Or is it a technological advance, a new word-processing feature that automatically trivializes whatever "text" is fed into it? In this month's "Media" column, James Bowman anatomizes the February 12 edition of the Sunday *New York Times*, paying particular attention to James Atlas's feeble *Magazine* article on thirty- and forty-something conservative intellectuals, "The Counter Counterculture."

Vapid though Mr. Atlas's foray into alien intellectual territory was, the *Times Magazine* managed to outdo itself the very next week with an article by the journalist Dinitia Smith on the contemporary poetry scene. Mr. Atlas and his editors may have produced an anemic mess, an article that effectively reduced the whole story of conservative intellectual life in this country to a matter of haberdashery and lifestyle. But Miss Smith went even further, turning out an article of such mind-numbing stupidity that it probably qualifies for some sort of affirmative-action grant. Entitled "The Poet Kings and the Versifying Rabble," the piece purports to tell the story of how contemporary poetry is being opened up and "democratized" by such pop atavistic phenomena as hip-hop, rap, and MTV. Certainly, Miss Smith's grammar has been "democratized." Here she is on poets who win prizes for their poetry: "The most awarded of all is John Ashbery." And her judgment is not far behind: "Ice Cube [a rapper] and Scarface [ditto] chant modern versions of Homeric odes, heroic tales of romance and men at war."

This is the purest twaddle, of course, but Miss Smith professes to be made starry-eyed by developments in contemporary poetry. "Never before has poetry seemed to be in such a vital, healthy state," she enthused. "Never before have so many poetry books been published—1,200 volumes in 1993 alone." Miss Smith is impressed by big numbers. Many of our readers will have noticed that snatches of poetry now appear on panels in New York City buses and subways. So what? you ask, and rightly. But this cutesy public-relations ploy has set Miss Smith's heart aflutter: "*five million* people a day," she exclaims, "exposed to Elizabeth

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Bishop and Robert Frost"—as if poetry were a kind of germ that one could catch by careless propinquity. It's the same sort of logic—if logic is the *mot juste*—that leads museum curators to salivate over crowds filing past paintings in their blockbuster art exhibitions. In those fleeting seconds, they, too, are "exposed" to art.

Miss Smith's homage to the muse proceeds with a profile of the poet W. S. Merwin that, considered strictly in terms of sugar content, is a diabetic's death warrant. "I'd got lost looking for W. S. Merwin's house on the Hawaiian island of Maui," Miss Smith begins, following up with a few sentences of "fine writing." Then this:

> It was almost like rain forest here—pink and red hibiscus, ginger flowers filled with rain from the night.
>
> Then, suddenly, there he was, as if he'd somehow materialized out of the rain.

No, the magazine did *not* come with an airsickness bag, but just imagine: the *Times* actually paid to send this woman to Hawaii.

Alas, the very worst part of the article was yet to come. This was a two-page spread called "The Poetry Pantheon: Who's Who, From Kingmaker to Scold," text by Dinitia Smith, illustrations by Michael Witte. This little feature was a chart, replete with names and caricatures, purporting to give readers the low-down on such things as "Best-Looking Male Poets," "Best-Looking Female Poets," "Top Editors," and "Big Guns, Kingmakers." There was also a box listing "Main Groups and Schools of Thought," which featured such important literary categories as "Earth Mothers," "Sex, Gender, Politics," "The Neo-Colonialists," and "Stones and Bones Poets" ("*When they get depressed*," Miss Smith's "text" informs us parenthetically, "*they tend to use a lot of imagery of the above*"). But our favorite category was "Scolds" ("*Trying to uphold the standards!*"), partly, we admit, because Robert Richman, poetry editor of *The New Criterion*, was included.

Dinitia Smith's article is worse than a travesty, it is an insult. And quite apart from what it tells us about the nose dive of standards at *The New York Times Magazine*, we had to wonder about the timing of the article. Anyone with a shred of feeling for literature will be alternately repulsed and enraged by the dim-witted philistinism that the piece exhibits. Yet we note that the *Times* has just appointed a new daily book critic and a new editor of its Sunday book review. As these gentlemen prepare to take up their posts at our "paper of record," what can they be thinking about their employer's commitment to literary or journalistic standards?

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Kandinsky & the birth of abstraction

by Hilton Kramer

For me, the province of art and the province of nature thus became more and more widely separated, until I was able to experience both as completely independent realms. This occurred to the full extent only this year.
—Vasily Kandinsky, in 1913

The birth of abstract art—art that makes no direct, immediately discernible reference to recognizable objects—has long been recognized as a fateful event in the history of art. Yet the intellectual origins of this event, which promptly established abstraction as one of the central traditions of twentieth-century painting and sculpture, have remained a vague and little-understood subject for the vast public that now takes abstract art for granted as part of the familiar scenery of modern cultural life. That the emergence of abstraction early in the second decade of this century represented for its pioneer creators a solution to a spiritual crisis; that the conception of this momentous artistic innovation entailed a categorical rejection of the materialism of modern life; and that abstraction was meant by its visionary inventors to play a role in redefining our relationship to the universe—all of this, were its implications even dimly grasped, would come as a shock to many people who now happily embrace the history of modern art as little more than a succession of styles, or art fashions, that may have something to do with the history of taste but do not have much to tell us about life.

As for the academic study of modernism, Professor Rosalind Krauss no doubt spoke for many of her colleagues in the universities when, in the 1980s, she declared that she found it "indescribably embarrassing to mention *art* and *spirit* in the same sentence." Yet the artists who first created abstract painting—Vasily Kandinsky and Piet Mondrian pre-eminently among them—did not share that embarrassment. They really did conceive of their artistic endeavors as serving a spiritual mission, and if, some eighty-plus years after the birth of abstraction, we still take an interest in the art of its progenitors, we are obliged, I believe, to examine the ideas that shaped it, however odd or alien those ideas may look to us today.

This is certainly the case with Kandinsky, whose work is the subject of a current exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art that takes the birth of abstraction as its principal focus. Organized by Magdalena Dabrowski, "Kandinsky: Compositions" is a small exhibition about a very large subject.[1] Yet it has the virtue of concentrating our attention on one of the pivotal moments in modern cultural history: the years 1910 to 1913, when

1 "Kandinsky: Compositions" opened at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, on January 26, 1995, and remains on view through April 25. It then travels to the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (June 1–September 3). A catalogue, by Magdalena Dabrowski, has been published by MOMA and Harry N. Abrams (127 pages, $39.95; $22.50 paper).

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Kandinsky was deeply engaged in painting the pictures that led him into the realm of abstraction and, at the same time, formulating the theories which supported this audacious endeavor. The exhibition includes some of the most beautiful paintings that have ever been created in the name of abstraction, and the greatest of them—*Composition V* (1911), from an unidentified private collection; *Composition VI* (1913), from the Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg; and *Composition VII* (1913), from the Tretyakov Gallery in Moscow—have the additional interest of being relatively unfamiliar to the American public. The many studies that are also included in the exhibition give us a vivid account of the inspired, painstaking pictorial thought that Kandinsky lavished on this crucial turn in his artistic development. If only because of the masterpieces of lyric abstraction the show contains, it would have to be considered an important occasion. What may not be so apparent is that it also marks an event in modern intellectual history.

Kandinsky was very much a man of ideas—a cosmopolitan artist and intellectual straight out of the emancipated bourgeois intelligentsia that dominated the life of art and social thought in Russia in the last decades of the nineteenth century and the early years of the twentieth. His keen interest in music, theater, poetry, philosophy, ethnology, and myth was an essential element in his thinking about art. So was his deep interest in the occult—an interest that he shared with Mondrian and certain other creators of early abstract art. The character of Kandinsky's mysticism was different from Mondrian's however—more socially and emotionally engaged, and less inclined to take refuge in strategies of withdrawal from the trials of life. Kandinsky relished intellectual combat and critical controversy. Even his celebrated treatise *On the Spiritual in Art*, which he published in the period covered by the current exhibition, bristles with argument, assertion, and polemical heat.

The paintings which Kandinsky first produced in his pursuit of abstraction, culminating in the *Compositions* he created in 1913, are likewise very different in character from Mondrian's. Whereas Mondrian's aesthetic of abstraction derived from the "logic" of Cubism, Kandinsky's had its origin in the more disorderly, emotion-charged conventions of Expressionism. While Mondrian's mode of abstraction found its ideal in a pictorial style of straight lines, primary colors, and rectangular structures, Kandinsky's abounded in graphic improvisation, coloristic invention, "hidden" images, and a tumult of painterly dynamism—in other words, lyric inspiration. Whereas everything in Mondrian's abstraction seeks fixity and order, Kandinsky's embraces the fluidity and flux and thus the sensuality of the mind's impressions as an essential ingredient of his art.

For both Mondrian and Kandinsky, the artistic base from which they made their fateful leap into abstraction was landscape painting, but their respective approaches to landscape were, again, very different. Whereas Mondrian's was that of an ascetic determined to strip nature of its mutable attributes, Kandinsky's was that of a mystical lyricist for whom nature is an enchanted realm of poetry and symbolism. Yet for both, the leap into abstraction was at once guided and sanctioned by their faith in the metaphysics of the occult, which in the end emancipated them from the mundanity of the observable world.

Kandinsky enjoyed a distinct advantage, however, in coming from a vastly richer intellectual and cultural milieu—one in which all artistic issues were subjected to intense analysis and informed argument by artists and critics who, in many fields, were energetically engaged in advancing new ideas. The Symbolist movement in Russian literature, music, and philosophy in the 1890s, itself deeply immersed in mystical systems of belief, had already disposed Kandinsky to look beyond the boundaries of naturalism and materialism for the foundations of his art. Munich, where he established himself at the turn of the century, was also the scene of a good deal of avant-garde activity that

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devalued any abject dependency on the imitation of nature in favor of stylized and symbolic representations of it. Compared to the pinched and provincial cultural atmosphere which Mondrian experienced in Amsterdam in the Nineties, Munich was a veritable hotbed of modernist thought, much of it addressed to imaginative departures from academic convention and the canons of realistic depiction in the arts.

In his pursuit of abstraction, moreover, Kandinsky was, if anything, even more directly indebted to the doctrines of theosophy than Mondrian, himself a confirmed acolyte of the occult. There are many pages of *On the Spiritual in Art*, as well as other writings by Kandinsky during the period of his turn to abstraction, that are barely intelligible without recourse to the ideas of Madame Blavatsky and Rudolf Steiner. Both are briefly mentioned in *On the Spiritual in Art*, but their influence—and that of two other theosophical writers, Annie Besant and C. W. Leadbeater—on Kandinsky's artistic thought was far greater at this crucial juncture in his development than the artist could bring himself to disclose at the time. His entire *Weltanschauung*, his worldview of life itself, was shaped by their philosophy of the occult.

On the Spiritual in Art takes as its point of departure a religious crisis that Kandinsky describes in terms virtually paraphrased from these theosophical writers. "Our souls, which are only now beginning to awaken after the long reign of materialism, harbor seeds of desperation, unbelief, lack of purpose," he writes in the Introduction, echoing the theosophists' diagnosis of the spiritual malaise that had overtaken mankind in the modern world. He continues:

> The whole nightmare of the materialistic attitude, which has turned the life of the universe into an evil, purposeless game, is not yet over. The awakening soul is still deeply under the influence of this nightmare.

Owing to the nature of this spiritual nightmare, Kandinsky writes, the artist's whole world of feeling has been radically altered. In an apparent reference of the "decadent" art movement of the 1890s, Kandinsky declares that "coarser emotions such as terror, joy, sorrow, etc., which served as the content of art during this period of trial, will now hold little attraction for the artist."

What, then, was to take the place of this failed artistic content? Kandinsky speaks of the artist's yearning "to awaken as yet nameless feelings of a finer nature." He invokes the possibility of an art that "also has an awakening prophetic power," and links this to "the spiritual life, to which art also belongs and in which it is one of the powerful agents." Yet because it is an essential part of Kandinsky's purpose in *On the Spiritual* to discredit alternatives to the "spiritual" program he envisions for the art of the future, he inveighs against a number of the reigning artistic orthodoxies of the period before outlining the terms of his agenda.

The primary target of his criticism is, of course, naturalism in all its materialist manifestations. Scorn is lavished upon the social radicals in the art world who favor naturalism—the "atheists" and "socialists of various shades," as Kandinsky calls them, given to quoting from Marx's *Capital* and announcing that "God is dead." Yet the aestheticism which, with its credo of *l'art pour l'art*—"art for art's sake"—had itself rebelled against materialist orthodoxy, is also denounced as a "dissipation of the artist's powers." For Kandinsky, this soulless aestheticism, which attempted to make a religion of art itself, was as much a threat to the "spiritual in art" as the most orthodox forms of the materialism it opposed.

It is at this point in *On the Spiritual in Art* that Kandinsky invokes the name of Madame Blavatsky. He cites theosophy as "one of the greatest spiritual movements" of the new century, and commends its mystical "path of inner consciousness" as the proper approach to "problems of the spirit." He then reminds his readers of Madame Blavatsky's prophecy that "in the twenty-first century this earth will be a paradise by comparison with what it is now"—a prophecy

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that, in Kandinsky's view, the new art of abstraction was destined to play a crucial role in fulfilling. For in Kandinsky's conception of the artist's new vocation, he was destined to become a spiritual leader of mankind—still another idea he derived from theosophical doctrine.

It wasn't only in his conception of the artist as a spiritual leader, moreover, that Kandinsky drew upon occult doctrine. *On the Spiritual in Art* is, after all, a treatise on the aesthetics of painting, and a good many of what appear to be purely aesthetic observations—about form, about color, about spatial relationships—are similarly derived from theosophical pronouncements. In this respect, *Thought-Forms*—the theosophical classic by Annie Besant and C. W. Leadbeater that was translated into German in 1908—seems to have been of capital importance. When, for example, in the chapter of *On the Spiritual* devoted to "The Language of Forms and Colors," Kandinsky sets about the task of assigning specific meanings to specific colors, he is clearly appropriating an occult practice.

Thus about the color blue, Kandinsky writes that "the deeper the blue becomes, the more strongly it calls man toward the infinite, awakening in him a desire for the pure and, finally, the supernatural"—an obvious echo of the assertion in *Thought-Forms* that "the different shades of blue all indicate religious feeling." When he writes about green that "pure green is to the realm of color what the so-called bourgeoisie is to human society: it is an immobile, complacent element, limited in every respect," this description, too, bears a distinct resemblance to the statement in *Thought-Forms* that "green seems always to denote adaptability; in the lowest case, when mingled with selfishness, this adaptability becomes deceit," etc. And while it is true that Kandinsky takes certain liberties with this theosophical practice, deviating from some of the meanings assigned to colors in *Thought-Forms* and other occult writings, he nonetheless follows the practice of conferring upon each color a significance that is finally metaphysical.

So, too, with Kandinsky's conception of pictorial form. In *The Sounding Cosmos*, the definitive study of the place occupied by occult doctrine in Kandinsky's theory and practice of abstraction, the Finnish scholar Sixten Ringbom reminds us that "thoughts and feeling, theosophy taught, have *direct* formative powers, and in *Thought-Forms* there is an important passage which only required an artistic application in order to serve as a manifesto for non-objective art." In this passage there are said to be "three types of form-producing thought, of which the first two take the image of persons or material objects, and the third 'takes a form entirely its own, expressing its inherent qualities in the matter which it draws round it.'" In this third category, wrote the authors of *Thought-Forms*, "we have a glimpse of forms natural to the astral or mental planes"—in other words, abstract form. To which Ringbom adds: "If, as theosophy maintained, there was a world of form and color independent of material objects, then such forms could be exploited artistically and provide the content replacing the object."

In his pursuit of abstraction, Kandinsky similarly divided his paintings into three categories—Impressions, Improvisations, and Compositions—and while they are not in every respect congruent with the division of form outlined in *Thought-Forms*, they nonetheless trace a similar course. As Magdalena Dabrowski writes in the catalogue accompanying the current exhibition at MOMA:

> Impressions were the pictures stimulated by "direct impressions of external nature," expressed in "linear-painterly form." Works that were intended to convey "impressions of internal nature" and that represented "chiefly unconscious, for the most part, suddenly arising expressions of events of an inner character" were called Improvisations. [Kandinsky] described the most ambitious of these categories, Compositions, as "the expressions of feelings that have been forming within me in a similar way (but over a very long period of time), which, after the preliminary sketches, I have slowly and almost pedantically examined

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> and worked out. Here, reason, the conscious, the deliberate, and the purposeful play a preponderant role. Except that I always decide in favor of feeling rather than calculation."

In a long career that was copious in production, Kandinsky reserved the term Composition for only ten paintings between the years 1910 and 1939. The first three Compositions were, alas, destroyed during the Second World War, and so we know them today only from preliminary studies and photographs. The last three, though they are included in the current exhibition, fall outside the period that is its principal focus—the period that saw the birth of abstract painting. It is therefore in *Compositions IV* through *VII* and their related studies that we can follow Kandinsky's development as he struggled to formulate his artistic ideas and create the pictorial language that enabled him to produce his first abstract paintings.

But did Kandinsky really succeed in these works in creating an art of pure abstraction? I believe he did; but early on in the history of abstract painting, as its champions divided into factions and each upheld an orthodoxy that precluded the admission of any rival version of abstraction, questions were raised as to whether Kandinsky's *Compositions* could be accepted as authentic examples of abstract art. No less a critic than Mondrian himself was one of the first to express some doubts on the matter. In the September 1918 number of the magazine *De Stijl*, five years after Kandinsky painted his first abstract paintings, Mondrian published an essay called "The New Plastic in Painting." With that essay he reproduced two pictures: Picasso's Cubist masterpiece *Le Violin (Jolie Eva)* (1912) and Kandinsky's *Composition VI* (1913); and insisted that the Cubist painting, even though it still "represents particular things," came closer than Kandinsky's in expressing "the human spirit" because it "introduces the straight line where it is not directly seen in the object." Then, confining Kandinsky to a footnote, Mondrian wrote as follows:

> Kandinsky too broke the closed line that describes the broad contour of objects, but as he did not sufficiently tense the natural contour, his work remained predominantly an expression of natural feeling. Comparing the works of Picasso and Kandinsky . . . one sees clearly how important are the tension of curved line and use of the straight. Kandinsky's generalized expression, like Picasso's, came about through the abstraction of naturalistic form and color: but in Kandinsky's line still remains a *vestige* of the contour of objects, whereas Picasso introduces the free straight line. Although Picasso still uses fragments of the contour of things, he carries them to determination, whereas Kandinsky leaves somewhat intact the confluence of line and color found in nature.

Mondrian was certainly right in claiming to find in Kandinsky's *Composition VI* some trace of a "confluence of line and color found in nature," but his argument with Kandinsky cannot be understood entirely in terms of the aesthetics of abstraction. It was because Mondrian had come to believe that the spiritual mission of abstract art could not be fully realized except by means of straight lines that he condemned Kandinsky's lyrical abstraction as "predominantly an expression of natural feeling." Among theosophists, which Mondrian and Kandinsky both were, this was a pronouncement of spiritual failure. Needless to say, this was not the way Kandinsky saw the matter. By 1913, he believed he had arrived at a stage in his development when he was able, as he wrote, "to experience both [the province of art—meaning spirit—and the province of nature] as completely separate realms." Within a decade after 1913 he would, to be sure, abandon the Expressionist component in abstraction and make use of straight lines. But the straight line never became for him, as it did for Mondrian, either a sign of his spiritual mission or an exclusive component of his aesthetic. Yet for both of these masters of abstraction, theirs was an art born of this strange alliance of aesthetics and mysticism.

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The grammar of "Dissent"

by Roger Kimball

Today the Zeitgeist presses down upon us with a greater insistence than at any other moment of the century.
—Irving Howe, "This Age of Conformity" (1954)

Anyone who doubts that there is such a thing as life after death should take a moment to consider the career of *Dissent* magazine. It is enough to give posthumous existence a bad name. When *Dissent* first appeared, in 1954, left-wing anti-Stalinism was still the burning hope of partially disabused socialists: a means of seeming to reject Communist tyranny without compromising one's leftist credentials. A bit earlier, *Partisan Review* had demonstrated that one could cleave to the rhetoric of Trotskyist radicalism and still champion the high-modernist aesthetic of such writers as T. S. Eliot and Wallace Stevens. It was a neat trick. But it was not easily repeated. *Dissent* was meant to be a more patently activist version of *Partisan Review*—that is to say, it was meant to maintain a more visible pose of anti-bourgeois animus. In the event, *Dissent* has been a lot duller and more given to sermonizing. Officially founded by a half-dozen writers, including the sociologist Lewis Coser and the art historian Meyer Schapiro, *Dissent*'s guiding spirit was always the literary critic Irving Howe, who served as the quarterly's chief editor from 1954 until his death in 1993 at the age of seventy-three. It must be acknowledged that Howe was a gifted and undoctrinaire critic. In the course of his long career, he wrote with sympathy and insight about figures as diverse as Céline and T. E. Lawrence, Faulkner, Edith Wharton, and Robert Frost.

But Irving Howe was also a crank. Criticism, his true *métier*, was insufficiently *engagé* to satisfy his taste for political drama. He required an existential state of emergency to be content; and if no real state of emergency existed, it was the work of a moment for him to invent one. *Dissent* was his philosopher's stone, his unfailing accomplice in the production of political bewitchment. In this sense, the magazine, now in its forty-first year, is one of the longest-running chronicles of imaginary disasters on record. It is also an extraordinary homage to the plasticity of the word "socialist."

Dissent has always specialized in a certain form of moralistic handwringing, combining thundering self-righteousness with a liberal deployment of straw men. In the "Word to Our Readers" that introduces the first issue of the magazine, the editors, noting that "the accent of *Dissent* will be radical," write that

> the purpose of this new magazine is suggested by its name: to dissent from the bleak atmosphere of conformism that pervades the political and intellectual life of the United States; to dissent from the support of the *status quo* now so noticeable on the part of many former radicals and socialists; to dissent from the terrible assumption that a new war is necessary

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> or inevitable, and that the only way to defeat Stalinism is through atomic world suicide.

But, but . . . *was* the political and intellectual atmosphere of the United States really so bleak and conformist in the Fifties? (If so, how extraordinary that Irving Howe and his band of stalwarts managed to rise above it all.) Supposing that "many former radicals and socialists" did support the status quo: would that have been such a bad thing? Perhaps the status quo in the mid-fifties had a lot to be said for it. In fact, conjuring "former radicals and socialists" (a.k.a. the guiding spirits of *Partisan Review*) was chiefly a device for (1) identifying ideological enemies and (2) declaring one's own anti-Americanism. And then there is the brave decision to dissent from "the terrible assumption that a new war is necessary or inevitable" and—quite a separate matter—that "the only way to defeat Stalinism is through atomic world suicide." The first part of this "terrible assumption" is disingenuous verbiage, the second part is apocalyptic fantasy. What really *is* terrible is not the assumption that war might be necessary—sometimes, alas, war is necessary, as Adolf Hitler demonstrated beyond cavil in 1939—but the pretense that one occupies a moral empyrean immune from the ordinary political choices and tribulations that worry lesser mortals. What is not only terrible but intellectually dishonest is the evocation of "atomic suicide" as "the only way to defeat Stalinism." This febrile imagining belongs to the realm of *Dr. Strangelove*, not serious political commentary.

That prefatory note was a specimen piece of *Dissent* rhetoric, boastful, mildly contradictory, full of specious categories and false dichotomies. A bit further along in the editorial statement, we read that

> *Dissent* will not have any editorial position or statements. Each writer will speak for himself. Our magazine will be open to a wide arc of opinion, excluding only Stalinists and totalitarian fellow-travelers on the one hand, and those former radicals who have signed their peace with society as it is, on the other. We shall welcome any expression of lively and competent thought . . . even if these [*sic*] dissent from *Dissent*.

As one commentator observed about this passage, "perhaps no more remarkable spectrum has been conceived since *Mein Kampf*. One wonders what the editors plan to do about the Royalists, aristocrats, anti-Semites, and other non-signers of peace with society who decided to take advantage of this implicit invitation." Of course, this editorial jumble might be partly the result of sloppy writing; but as is often the case, the sloppy writing here is the carapace of sloppy thinking. What the statement really means is the editors of *Dissent* welcome contributions from those who share *Dissent*'s idea of dissent.

Today, *Dissent* will strike many readers as something of a museum piece. It stands as a dusty monument to the anxious, slightly embarrassed Marxism of the anti-Stalinist Left—a Marxism, that is to say, which is full of excuses, even, at times, for Marx himself. It's an odd redoubt that *Dissent* occupies. The Marxist worldview is largely presupposed, but then tinkered with, toned down, dressed up. The result is often more Marxish than Marxist (Howe once spoke in this context of adopting "a flexible Marxism.") Partisans of this species of Marxist patter—academics, mostly—love to talk about "the workers" and public ownership of "the means of production"; the word "socialist" sets their pulses racing; the only thing they like better than proclaiming their own altruism, independence, and high-mindedness is abusing others for their lack of those virtues. Intellectually, it is a shabby business. But it is impossible to understand the triumph of cultural radicalism in the United States in the 1960s and 1970s without understanding the appeal that institutions like *Dissent* exercised. In a word, *Dissent* offered anti-bourgeois radicalism for the disgruntled bourgeois. It provided the illusion of solidarity; it described an acceptably "socialist" menu

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of political issues and a vocabulary for dealing with them; above all it provided rationalizations: rationalizations for the manifold disappointments of Communism, for the elusive promises of socialism, for the irritatingly persistent success of "bourgeois capitalism."

The unremitting moralism of *Dissent* makes it difficult for any but true believers to digest much of it in a single sitting. Stylistically, the magazine has tended to exhibit approximately the same charm as a temperance tract or manifesto on the spiritual and political advantages of vegetarianism. Here, for example, is Irving Howe in a wistful mood, writing in the introduction to *Twenty-five Years of "Dissent"* (1979): "Let your mind go back in time. At a meeting of workers in Berlin in the 1870s, a social democrat named August Bebel speaks. He advances a new vision of human possibility . . ." And they're off. Or here is the late Michael Harrington, author of *The Other America* (1962) and one of Howe's most trusted collaborators at *Dissent*, in a 1989 essay called "Markets and Plans": "The point is . . . to free the socialism of tomorrow from the assumption that a market in a social order of increasing equality and popular democratic control is somehow as reprehensible as a market that functions to provide shacks for the poor and mansions for the rich."

"Shacks for the poor" *vs.* "mansions for the rich": a classic *Dissent* dichotomy. But Irving Howe remained the real master of this sort of thing. Here he is musing about the origins of American socialism: "What prompted thousands of ordinary Americans to become socialists was an impulse to moral generosity, a readiness to stake their hopes on some goal other than personal success. It was an impulse that drew its strength from an uncomplicated belief in freedom and fraternity; or to use an obsolete word, goodness." Such hopes and "moral generosity," you understand, that he, Irving Howe, exemplifies to an almost inconceivable degree.

But the editors of *Dissent* are not without mercy. Over the years, the two or three anthologies of writings from *Dissent* that they have put together have spared the curious but unfanatical student the burden of plodding through each and every issue. The latest chrestomathy, *Legacy of Dissent: Forty Years of Writing from "Dissent" Magazine*, was edited by Nicolaus Mills, a member of *Dissent*'s editorial board and Professor of American Studies at Sarah Lawrence.[1] Dedicated to Irving Howe and with introductory essays by *Dissent*'s co-editors, Mitchell Cohen and Michael Walzer, *Legacy of Dissent* not only provides a representative sampling of work that has appeared in *Dissent* from 1954 down to the present, but it also epitomizes the curious, hybrid radicalism that *Dissent* came to embody.

The book contains thirty essays and is divided into seven sections: "Social Visions," "Political Arguments," "Culture and Society," "Race," "Feminism," "Labor under Siege," and "The Cold War and After." In addition to two essays by Howe (one of which, "Images of Socialism" [1954], he co-authored with Lewis Coser), the volume features contributions by such well-known writers as Ignazio Silone, Robert Heilbroner, Michael Harrington, Norman Mailer, Paul Goodman, Richard Wright, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., Robert Reich, Andrei Sinyavsky, and Günter Grass. Some preliminary sense of the book's tenor can be gleaned by considering the titles of some of the essays: "The Choice of Comrades," "Roots of the Socialist Dilemma," "A Day in the Life of a Socialist Citizen," "White Man—Listen!," "Perspectives on the Women's Movement," "Diary from the Grape Strike." If this list of topics stirs your blood, then you are a natural-born *Dissent* reader and you ought to consider taking the magazine up on its invitation to remember it in your will.

As with any such miscellany, *Legacy of Dissent* is very much a mixed bag. There are the usual leftist curlicues: attacks on "the Reaganite carnival of selfishness," criticism of Solzhenitsyn's *Gulag Archipelago* for being

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1 *Legacy of Dissent: Forty Years of Writing from "Dissent" Magazine*, edited by Nicolaus Mills; Touchstone/Simon & Schuster, 463 pages, $16 paper.

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"too one-sided" and equating "socialism with Stalinism," paeans to radical feminism. One of the less agreeable aspects of Howe's rhetoric that quickly became a standard feature of *Dissent* and that is very much on view in this anthology is the constant bleating about the dangers of "conformism" and making one's peace with American society. This was the *raison d'être* of his famous essay "This Age of Conformity," which he published in *Partisan Review* in 1954 just before the first issue of *Dissent* appeared. Howe warns about "the temptations of an improved standard of living," criticizes intellectuals who have become "responsible and moderate," and deplores those who have "sold out" to the establishment. This was, as we have seen, a major theme of the editorial statement that prefaced the inaugural issue of *Dissent*. And it remained a leitmotif of his work and of other writers for *Dissent*. Typical is Mitchell Cohen's criticism, in his introduction to *Legacy of Dissent*, of those left-wing intellectuals in the 1950s who were "fleeing their past, anxiously making peace with American prosperity," and—sin of sins—"becoming comfortable." In 1979, reviewing the depredations of the 1950s, Howe singled out two especially woeful features of that much-maligned decade: McCarthyism and what he called the "systematic reconciliation between American intellectuals and commercial society."

This sort of talk is unpleasant but understandable in an underemployed intellectual of, say, twenty-three. But it looks poorly on the Distinguished Professor at the City University of New York who was, moreover, the recipient of the National Book Award, the Christian Gauss Seminar Chair at Princeton, the Bollingen Foundation Fellowship, among many, many other trophies of "the establishment," including the coveted MacArthur Fellowship. In fact, writing for *Dissent* seems greatly to enhance one's chances of receiving a MacArthur Fellowship. In addition to Howe, at least four other contributors to *Legacy of Dissent* are recipients of the lucrative award. Add Richard Rorty, a contributor to the Winter 1995 issue of *Dissent*, and the number of MacArthurites totals six. Rather plush for such an "oppositional" journal.

Dissent's chief talisman, however, has always been the word "socialism," which is defined in different ways by different writers but which provides an ideological idol to which most of the contributors pay obeisance. In fact, vagueness is part of the appeal of words like "socialism," which really function more as containers for ambition and animus than as conceptual tools. In his preface, Michael Walzer, a former student of Irving Howe's who is now on the faculty of the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton, characterizes the socialism championed by *Dissent* by invoking the even vaguer term "democracy." Among other things, Walzer writes, socialism means "the extension of democracy throughout all dimensions of life, economic and social as well as political." Translated into English, this means that socialism is tantamount to egalitarianism—another favorite word among writers for *Dissent*—that is to say, socialism involves a process of leveling not only in political life but "throughout all dimensions of life," e.g., in education, the arts, and social relations.

Although Howe once proclaimed that socialism "cannot be a surrogate for religious yearnings," the truth is that socialism has always been a metaphysical lodestar for the *Dissent* coterie. Howe and Lewis Coser began "Images of Socialism"—a definitive *Dissent* essay—by quoting Tolstoy: "God is the name of my desire." "We should like," they noted, "to twist Tolstoy's remark to our own ends: *socialism is the name of our desire.*" When we ask about the content of that desire, things get fuzzy. It involves the triumph of egalitarianism; it involves "planning," though not the nasty Stalinist sort; and it involves the attenuation if not the abolition of private property, though Howe and Coser act as if this is nothing to get excited about. "To be sure, socialism still presupposes the abolition of private property in the basic industries, but there is hardly a branch of the socialist movement

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. . . which places any high valuation on nationalization of industry *per se*." No doubt that comes as an immense relief to those who happen to own businesses: we are going to expropriate your property, but we aren't going to make much of a fuss about it.

"Utopia" is another word that one has to keep in mind when perusing *Dissent*. By mid-century, utopia had come under a shadow. If Hitler and Stalin were utopians, what then? Writers for *Dissent* dance around the term "utopia" the same way that they dance around "Marxism." They know that the word means "nowhere," that it has licensed some of the worst barbarism in history. But they can't do without it, because then they wouldn't be—socialists. Such a muddle. Howe's handling of the problem is characteristic. In "Images of Socialism," he and Coser criticize "pre-Marxist" utopias for being "a-historical"; they criticize Marx for being insufficiently detailed in his description of utopia; in the end, however, after the qualifications have been erected and the hedges trimmed, they emerge as utopians. Mostly, they put it in the most anodyne terms possible: "a life without some glimmer of a redeeming future [is] a life cut off from the distinctively human."

Well, sure. Everyone agrees with that. But they mean, or seem to mean, something considerably more. The last essay in *Legacy of Dissent* is Howe's 1993 note "Two Cheers for Utopia." Here, too, he is cautious. We live, he says there, in a time of "diminished expectations." But it is necessary to salvage some sense of utopia because "it is a claim for the value of desire, the practicality of yearning." Why desire or yearning requires utopia is not explained—in fact, they seem to function just fine without it—but the subject of utopia does give Howe the opportunity to expatiate on his favorite subject: the virtue of socialists as compared with . . . with . . . well, with everyone else. Unlike "liberals and conservatives," he explains, socialists are not "at ease with the existing social and political order." They are, however, "devoted to decency and democracy"—unlike you-know-who. In "Images of Socialism," he and Coser look forward to a society where "the motives for private accumulation and the values sanctioning it have significantly diminished." Again, the specifics are left vague. Nor are their attempts at elaboration especially helpful: The "goal" of socialism, we read, is "to create the kind of man who, to a measurable degree, ceases to be a manipulated object and becomes a motivated subject." I know, I know: you thought you had been a motivated subject all along, but not, apparently, in the world according to *Dissent*.

The closest that Howe comes to specifying the nature of socialist utopia is to say that technological progress has made it possible to abolish material scarcity. "Now, after the Industrial Revolution, the machine might do for all humanity what the slaves had done for the Greek patriciate." Elsewhere, he writes that "the liberal-radical claim is merely that the development of technology has now made possible . . . a solution of those material problems that have burdened mankind for centuries." (Note the "merely.") This of course is a classic Marxist theme. Once Communism has been installed, Marx famously wrote in *The German Ideology*, man will be emancipated from the burdens of capitalist drudgery and will be free to be a hunter in the morning, a fisherman in the afternoon, and a literary critic at night. Rather a cramped view of paradise, you might think, but there it is. Other Marxist writers—Herbert Marcuse, for example— have provided considerably more florid evocations of utopia. But in every case what stands between socialism (or Communism) and utopia is human nature. Thus it is that Howe and Coser must look forward to "a new kind of man" in order to imagine their socialist Eden. Humanity as it is now just isn't good enough. Howe and his circle know that there is such a thing as naïve socialism. Indeed, they make a great show of criticizing it. But their own political vision remains equally naïve because it completely ignores the indelible human resistance to socialist manipulation. Howe likes to speak about a time when society will be "organized

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for use and not profit." But such a society, if it ever comes about, will be a horrific dystopia populated by a damaged humanity. The failure to recognize this is one reason that *Dissent*'s politics generally seem so adolescent.

Given Howe's utopianism, his relation to the "New Left" of the 1960s and 1970s is instructive. On the one hand, he admired its "energy" and what he took to be its "idealism"; on the other hand, he deplored both its excesses and the unaccountable failure of its leaders to consult with Irving Howe about their activities. Writing in 1979, Howe criticized "the pathological terrorism of the Weathermen, the brutal factionalism with the SDS between the Maoists and other sects, the waste (once more, once more!) of all that splendid hope and energy. Unheeded, we could do little but warn and criticize."

And yet, in the beginning at least, *Dissent* did as much as any publication to nurture the New Left. Reprinted in *Legacy of Dissent* are Paul Goodman's "Growing Up Absurd" (1960)—one of several preludes to his immensely influential best-selling book of that title—and Norman Mailer's notorious exercise in radical chic, "The White Negro" (1957). Goodman's essay is a whiny complaint that life in America makes it "desperately hard" for "boys and young men" (girls and young women do not come into Paul Goodman's purview) to grow up normally. It is full of observations such as this: "In our society, bright lively children . . . are transformed into useless and cynical bipeds." Goodman's essay also contains my single favorite sentence from *Legacy of Dissent*. Discussing the most efficient way of dealing with juvenile delinquency, he suggests that public subsidies may be the best solution: "To reestablish in general what he calls the social balance, J. K. Galbraith proposes such a high longterm subsidy for all unemployed. He assures us that this would not be inflationary, and as the director of price controls for the OPA, he should know." What a touching faith in bureaucratic expertise!

In book form, Goodman's animadversions on the depredations of American society became a founding text of the counterculture. A different sort of preview of things to come was provided by Norman Mailer's "The White Negro: Superficial Reflections on the Hipster." Mailer himself described the essay as "one of the best things I have ever done." Be that as it may, the essay was certainly one of the most characteristic—not only of Mailer's own work but also of the burgeoning spirit of revolt that began to shudder through American society in the late 1950s. In tone, the essay is a silly display of existentialist braggadocio; in content it is a manifesto on behalf of moral nihilism. Mailer speaks casually of "the totalitarian tissues of American society" and invokes "the psychic havoc of the concentration camps and the atom bomb upon the unconscious mind of almost everyone alive in these years." The only authentic response to this situation, he says, is "to divorce oneself from society" and "to encourage the psychopath in oneself." This is the strategy of "the hipster," who has "absorbed the existentialist synapses of the Negro, and [who] for practical purposes could be considered a white Negro." (Stereotypes, anyone?)

The rest of the essay is a glorification of the hipster and his ethic of promiscuous sex, drug-taking, and addiction to violence. The hipster, Mailer explains, is part of "an elite with the potential ruthlessness of an elite, and a language most adolescents can understand instinctively, for the hipster's intense view of existence matches their experience and their desire to rebel." If this is not clear enough, Mailer conjures the image—it is what made the essay famous—of eighteen-year-old hoodlums who "beat in the brains of a candy-store keeper." For Mailer such behavior is acceptable, even laudable, because the psychopath, by murdering, demonstrates his "courage" and "purge[s] his violence." To the objection that it does not take much courage to kill someone older and weaker, Mailer replies that "one murders not only a weak fifty-year-old man but an institution as well, one violates private prop-

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erty, one enters into a new relation with the police and introduces a dangerous element into one's life."

There is more. "At bottom, the drama of the psychopath is that he seeks love." Oh? Mailer elaborates: "Not love as the search for a mate, but love as the search for an orgasm more apocalyptic than the one which preceded it." This is one reason that the hispter adores jazz: "jazz," Mailer tells us, "is orgasm." The hipster's quest "for absolute sexual freedom" entails the necessity of "becoming a sexual outlaw." But it is not only sexual morality that the hipster discards. "Hip abdicates from any conventional moral responsibility because it would argue that the result of our actions are unforeseeable, and so we cannot know if we do good or bad. . . . The only Hip morality . . . is to do what one feels whenever and wherever it is possible, and . . . to be engaged in one primal battle: to open the limits of the possible for onself, for oneself alone, because that is one's need." Charming, isn't it?

Mailer's extraordinary expostulation contains *in ovo* practically everything that went wrong with American culture under the assault of left-wing radicalism in the 1960s, from the addiction to violence, drugs, pop music, and sexual polymorphism, to the moral idiocy, jejune anti-Americanism, and mindless glorification of extreme states of experience. It says something that *Dissent* should have published this narcissistic yawp in the first place, but it is even more significant that its editors should choose to republish it now, thirty-five years later, without comment or apology.

The socialist fantasies of writers such as Irving Howe, Michael Walzer, and Michael Harrington represent one important side of *Dissent*; the importunate countercultural dithyrambs of writers like Goodman and Mailer represent another side. Taken together these essays constitute a recipe for what we would today call political correctness, and in this respect the current, Winter 1995, issue of *Dissent* does not disappoint. Here we have a piece on feminist "gains" at last September's United Nations Conference on Population and Development in Cairo, a meditation on sexual harassment, an article on the Welfare State that calls for "a new Keynesian order," and a celebration of the U.S. occupation of Haiti as "the first progressive military intervention since World War II." There is also a piece by Michael Lind announcing the death of intellectual conservativism, in response to which one is tempted to quote Mark Twain: Reports of my death have been greatly exaggerated. (For another response, see James Bowman's reflections on Mr. Lind below, pages 48–55.) Finally, there is an essay by the radical pragmatist Richard Rorty, who praises *Dissent* as "this country's most useful political magazine" but then goes on to espouse a chummy version of nihilism that would have even Irving Howe turning in his grave. "The nature of modernity," Rorty writes, is "as unprofitable a topic as the nature of man." Since "there is no entity larger than ourselves," we must give up on "the whole idea of *maturation*" as well as the habit of looking for "the *significance* of events." Rorty's pragmatist drivel reminds one of G. K. Chesterton's observation that "pragmatism is a matter of human needs; and one of the first human needs is to be something more than a pragmatist."

From the beginning, the guiding assumption of the circle of writers around *Dissent* was that the word "socialist," if correctly inflected, somehow purchased a nimbus of idealism. This elevated socialist victories beyond the reach of criticism and endowed its defeats with an aura of martyrdom. Irving Howe was no friend of Communism, but it is telling that his severest criticism was that Communism had ruined "so many good people." What made them good? Their attachment to socialist dogma. In the late 1860s, John Henry Newman published the *Grammar of Assent*, his magisterial inquiry into the logic of religious justification. Piecemeal, *Dissent* has provided us a kind of mirror image of Newman's great work: less rigorous and more clumsily written, but delving into matters that are just as mysterious but not, alas, as humanly satisfying.

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Sam Lipman at the NEA

by Joseph Epstein

Sam—what a perfect fit that name seemed for Samuel Lipman. Nobody I know ever called him Samuel. He was Sam, and within his circle of friends, and even enemies, if you said Sam, it was like saying Johnny (Carson), or Frank (Sinatra), or Michael (Jordan), everyone knew about whom you were talking. I'm fairly certain Sam would not have approved those Johnny, Frank, and Michael references; I'm fairly certain he would not have known who Michael Jordan is, though Sam was a sports fan in his youth.

Midway in his more than four-year battle with leukemia, while talking about quack cures for cancer, I mentioned to Sam that I had somewhere read that Steve McQueen, in the last months of his battle with cancer, had gone to Mexico in search of a cure not allowed in the United States. "Who," asked Sam, after a pause, "is Steve McQueen?" Sam was then fifty-eight and had spent all his life in America; and I thought to myself, boy, Sam really knew how to live. How Sam lived was as an immitigable highbrow. Not long after I first met Sam, one evening when we were walking in Washington, I asked him if he watched many movies or much television. "I consider the movies and television," he said, without breaking stride, "dogshit."

Although I had been reading Sam's music criticism with admiration since he first set up as a music critic in *Commentary* in 1975, and although I was once on a panel with him discussing American culture at the Plaza Hotel in New York, I only became Sam's friend in 1984, when, partly through his urging (as I was later to learn), I was appointed a member of the National Council on the Arts, the advisory body of the National Endowment for the Arts. I accepted the appointment for no more serious reason than that I thought it might be a useful experience as well as a way of getting out of the neighborhood for two or three days every three months. Council meetings were held at the Old Post Office Building on Pennsylvania Avenue in Washington. Sam had been on the Council since 1982, and, in stark distinction to my rather larky view of the appointment, he treated his as if it were not merely a political responsibility but something akin to fighting in World War III.

"You know Sam Lipman?" Frank Conroy, the novelist who was then director of the Endowment's literature program, asked me. When I allowed that I knew Sam but didn't know him well, Frank, the one person I knew who worked at the NEA and who was normally an easygoing fellow, his mouth curling into a sneer, said: "The guy is really *sick*."

What Sam's sickness turned out to consist of was taking art and his job on the Council with deadly seriousness. How seriously he took it I saw on the Friday of the first meeting that I attended. Frank Hodsoll was then the Chairman of the Endowment, but Sam, it became immediately clear, was easily the dominating figure in the room. What

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made his dominance so impressive was that he insisted on saying things that most people in the room had no wish to hear. Chief among them was that much of the art that the NEA was spending its $170 or so million on was either trivial or misguided or pernicious.

I have never seen a performance to match Sam's over the next four years in that long dreary room, the smell of cookies from the mall outside its doors wafting in, as he held a crowd of perhaps some two hundred people who generally disagreed with him at bay. Before each Council meeting, members, whose job it was to approve grants and set policy, were sent a thick three-ring notebook containing perhaps three hundred small-print pages of bureaucratic prose, mainly having to do with federal guidelines, grants, and reports on the status or situation or administrative problems of one or another art. These books, I soon discovered, could turn my eyeballs to isinglass in something under ten minutes flat. I read them chiefly to search for absurdities, sniffing to smell rats.

Sam read them as if they were not merely Talmud but Kabbalah, Zohar, and newly discovered Dead Sea Scrolls. He read them as if the salvation of his soul depended upon them. He did his homework like no one else on the Council. And this, combined with his powerful mind and the skill he developed in public argument, was what gave him his advantage. The Council was composed, I believe, of twenty-six members, and Sam, I should estimate, did roughly a third of the talking. Of significant utterance, I should say he was responsible for perhaps 80 percent. At one meeting, Kurt Adler, the conductor and artistic director of the San Francisco Opera and a fellow Council member, leaned toward me and, in a heavy Teutonic accent, whispered: "Zam Lifman I zink takes too great pride in his maztery of ze Englis langooage."

Soon after I arrived for my first Council meeting, Sam told me that he thought the NEA's literature program was one of its poorest, and that he would like me to scrutinize it with some care. He was correct about the dreariness of the literature grants. He had control over the music program, which had solid directors and maintained a high level of seriousness. The dance program also seemed strong, in good part owing to the efflorescence of ballet and modern dance in our day. But so much else—visual arts, design, theater, a sad avant-garde hotch-potch called inter-arts—seemed very poor stuff. There was a separate program for minority-group artists, and it was Sam's sense that this was sacred terrain and more than he could hope to take on. Folk arts—basket-weaving, bluegrass fiddling, quilt-making, and the rest—had in Sam's mind the same fecal status as movies and television, but he grudgingly left them alone. He was always suspicious of the program called media arts—each year he was the lone dissenter on a grant given to the "Bob & Ray" radio show—and generally registered his skepticism about the vast sums being spent to develop what he felt were glamorous projects that were likely to end up in the smoke of which pipe dreams were made.

At the NEA, Sam established himself as a man not to be fooled with. He was lawyerly, in the best sense of the term. He argued well and fairly—always on the issues. He never attacked anyone personally, and the one time I saw him lose his poise was when someone in the room attacked him on what he felt were personal grounds, at which point he quickly lashed back. He knew very well that his defense of high standards, his distaste for art whose chief merit seemed to be its popularity, his disdain for obscurantism, and his distrust of politicized art was not what people wanted to hear. Without Sam, the Council could have devoted itself to undeflected self-congratulation, each member happy to be associated with art, which, by absence of definition, was, as Irish widows used to say of the Church, "the grand thing, you know."

I once asked Sam how it felt to take on so relentlessly that entire room of NEA Council members and staff. "I don't enjoy it," he said. "In fact, when I realize everyone in the room

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hates what I'm saying, my *kischkes* churn. But what choice do I have?" With the exception of Helen Frankenthaler, Carlos Moseley, myself, and occasionally Jacob Neusner, scarcely anyone in the room wished himself to be identified with Sam's strong and always clearly articulated views. Yet during the four years I sat at Council meetings I noted a gradual building-up of respect for Sam: for his concern, for his ability, for his authority as a former performing artist and a critic.

Sam loathed ignorance, and at the Endowment, both on the Council and among the staff, it was never in short supply, but, as he once confided to me, it was difficult for him to keep up his dislike of many of the people he encountered there. You spend weekend after weekend in a gloomy room with the same people, he said, it's inhuman to hold grudges or have unfriendly feelings toward them.

Sam was a hero at the NEA, but he was no martyr. Despite the uphill battle, he enjoyed the fight. He was, by temperament and metabolism, permanently supercharged, and he loved the action at the Endowment: the arguing, conniving, the deal making, however small the deals might be. Members stayed at the Hay-Adams during my early years on the Council. ("Nothing too good for us Communists," an old joke has it.) Many mornings I met Sam for the prodigiously over-priced breakfasts there, and we would review what was coming up during the long day ahead. One had to be insensate not to sense his excitement at the prospect of another day in the trenches.

Sam was not untouched by anxiety and suspicion, maladies common to intellectuals, and he combined these with insomnia, no doubt the product of a racing mind, whose motor, my guess is, only profound works of musical art could still. The insomnia gave him more time to work out the possibilities suggested by the anxiety. I remember sitting in one of the elegantly paneled, heavily draped rooms at the Hay-Adams, Sam devouring a bowl of Brazil nuts and cashews, asking me to identify (I couldn't) a piece of piano music that he had once played in concert, and laying out for me ways he thought Frank Hodsoll might be "outflanking" him. Sam was a powerful motive finder. He reminded me, in this aspect of his personality, of Metternich, who, when the Russian ambassador died on the eve of the Congress of Verona, is supposed to have said: "I wonder why he did that."

Sam was always more concerned to wield influence in the right direction than to garner praise. From time to time, I would pass along to Sam a compliment I had heard about his splendid music criticism, but he seemed little interested in these. He wanted his writing to result in change: scoundrels thrown out, people of quality put in, programs changed, argument leading to action. His days at the NEA allowed him to believe that here his influence was genuine, even though friends told him he was wasting his time. Although he had a decisive hand in a report on arts education and on the place of art in American civilization, the sad truth is that few people read such reports, and no one at all ever acts upon them, and so little evidence of his immense effort at the Endowment remains.

Sam had to have known this, and doubtless it chagrined him, especially in later years, when his six-year term on the Council was ended. If he needed a justification—and being Sam, he probably did—his personal defense of his time at the Endowment could have been that of the immensely compassionate cardinal who, when asked how he could possibly have worked for so uncompassionate a Pope as Pius XII, replied: "You don't know what I have prevented." Sam prevented a lot; things at the NEA would have been much worse without him.

They certainly would have been a great deal more boring. For twelve or so days every year, Sam demonstrated how a serious mind worked. He was almost never less than brilliant; it was his unrelieved brilliance that commanded attention. Program directors at the NEA must have trembled when they saw Sam's hand shoot up to ask a question. One of these directors once described

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Council meetings as days of extreme boredom punctuated by a few moments of genuine terror. The terror, my guess is, had principally to do with getting through Sam's interrogations. Sam's great advantage in all these matters, what gave him his impressive authority, was that he knew what he believed; nothing improves one's arguments and clarifies one's passion as knowing one's own true views.

I shall never forget a group who one day visited the Council to speak about minority interests in the arts. Two blacks were among the group, along with a Hispanic- and Japanese-American. Their case was that of pure victimhood: they argued that they had been too-long excluded from participation in the cultural life of the country; and now it was their turn to speak out, angrily and exclusively, about their claims against a country that had denied them their place. Naturally, everyone in the room was utterly cowed.

Except Sam. After raising his hand to respond, Sam began tentatively, saying that he didn't wish to argue about their views of their own past, only about their vision of the future. He alluded briefly to his own immigrant parents. Then, growing less tentative, gathering strength for the mounting of his real theme, Sam said that he always believed, and nothing could make him disbelieve, that the real dream of American civilization was one of unity, a large and diverse people united in a fundamental belief in merit and fairness and honorableness, and that anyone who gave up this dream was losing sight of something absolutely crucial about life in America. Sam's tone was less that of polemic than of pleading on behalf of good will in the name of good sense. As he finished, Sam had the respect of everyone in the room. In my six years on the Council, this was far and away its finest moment. God, I thought, I am proud that this man is my friend.

Sam's brilliance, I came to discover, did not exclude his being wrong. Like most intellectuals, he needed to display his brilliance. I recall one mortifying moment when, early in the day, Sam came up to me at my seat at the Council table to whisper that he needed my support on an item that was coming up for discussion. Whatever the item was, I spoke to the point, backing Sam's play. I believe we carried the day. That afternoon I made some comment about the relation between criticism and the creation of art. Sam raised his hand and said, much as he disliked disagreeing with his friend Joe Epstein, he couldn't help observing that in making my comment I was falling into the same trap Ezra Pound had fallen into in the 1930s. I'm not sure what the trap was, but, let's face it, it couldn't have been much less than proto-fascism.

I heard Sam play the piano only once—with his wife, Jeaneane Dowis, a piece for four hands by Schubert. But I always felt that Sam's experience as a piano prodigy had a powerful shaping influence on him. In nearly every aspect of his life he was, to take a word from music criticism, virtuosic. Since a little boy, he was used to captivating an audience. He was on what I think of as the concert performer's ego diet. The concert performer—usually a pianist or violinist—plays, people burst into applause, beg him to play more, afterward fête him: how brilliant you were tonight, more lobster, you must meet my daughter. I rather doubt if Sam ever quite got over all that.

I remember at the conclusion of one Council meeting Sam telling me that he had to return home to practice two Mozart pieces. "What a delight that must be," I said, envying him. "It isn't," he shot back, saying no more. I wondered what he meant. Perhaps he could no longer play to his own exacting standard and long practice sessions made this plain to him. At some point, Sam, as he once told me, knew that he could not have the kind of career at the piano that he had dreamed of since childhood. Of what did that dream consist? The concert pianist as hero, genius, conquistador; it was the hauteur of Liszt stopping in mid-performance to say ironically to Tsar Nicholas I that

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he didn't wish his playing to interrupt his highness's conversation: "Music, herself, should be silent when Nicholas speaks."

Did Sam ever find anything to replace that dream of power and glory that began in art? I don't know, but I do know that his conception of himself was in part heroic. Romantic music may have lent the background to this conception. One of Sam's heroes, I was to discover only late in our friendship, was T. E. Lawrence; he thought *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* one of the world's great books. The appeal of Lawrence for intellectuals, like that of Trotsky for an earlier generation, was obvious: the man who made moot the question of which was greater, the pen or the sword, by wielding both to maximum effect. Lawrence, an outsider, educated, inspired, obsessed, one has no difficulty seeing the attraction of such a man for Sam.

To have had a reasonably successful run as a young pianist, to be this country's best music critic (and to have had one's performance in this capacity certified by Virgil Thomson), to have been one of the two founders of an important cultural magazine, none of this, I suspect, was quite enough for Sam. "He who strives will never enjoy this life peacefully," Paul Klee wrote in his diary, and Sam was nothing if not a striver.

In my musical ignorance, I sometimes thought Sam might have made a great conductor, a job that would have allowed him to use both his musical talent and executive ability and that would have suited, in at least a small way, his taste for power. I can easily imagine Sam being addressed as "Maestro" and loving it; I shouldn't have minded calling him that myself. He had, when the spirit took him, the necessary imperiousness for the job. I have seen Sam ask a waiter what kind of mineral water he had, and when the man named no fewer than six kinds, Sam, looking disappointed, said, "Never mind, I'll just have a beer." On another occasion, in another restaurant, he had forgotten his glasses at the office and asked that someone call and have them brought to him at the restaurant. Very maestro-ish.

As for his taste for power, Sam was not only aware of it, but could, in a rueful way, be highly amusing about it. Ten years ago, at a party in the Rainbow Room celebrating the twenty-fifth anniversary of Norman Podhoretz's editorship of *Commentary*, a party at which Sam and Jeaneane played in Norman's honor, I found myself at the same table as Sam. Also at this party, along with their security men and their inevitable walky-talkies, were Secretary of State George Schultz, Mayor Ed Koch, U.N. Ambassador Jeane Kirkpatrick, Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan, and former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger. At our table sat, along with husbands and wives, the conductor Gerard Schwarz, the novelist Cynthia Ozick, the English critic John Gross, and Hilton Kramer. Sam, checking the room, leaned over to me and said, "I see we're seated at the children's table."

Sam could be a very funny man. He liked to hear a joke and he adored conveying one. But his own wit, as in the children's table joke, was best when personal, issuing out of his perception of his own position or condition in life. Not long after he had begun his treatment for leukemia at Sloan-Kettering, he was asked, as I gather everyone who has any complicated blood work done in the age of AIDS must now be asked, how many sex partners he had had over the past decade. "Oh," said Sam, "I can tell you the exact number for longer than the past quarter of a century. But are you going to be disappointed!" And he held up his index finger.

Sam's natural tendency, his temperament, was critical. He spent a fair amount of time criticizing various people at the NEA, but the man he devoted much of his critical energy to was the chairman, Frank Hodsoll, whom, in fact, he rather liked. But liking Hodsoll did not stanch the flow of criticism. So I was surprised when one day Sam said to me, "You know one thing I really admire about Frank?" I couldn't, truly, imagine what this might be. "What I admire about him," Sam said, "is his bladder. I've been in meetings with Frank for ten or twelve hours, and not once did he have to go to the bathroom."

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Sam didn't have the bladder to be chairman of the NEA, but that didn't stop him from fantasizing about the job. Just because he knew more than anybody else about it, he thought he was qualified for it. Not only did he never really have a chance for the chairmanship, but it would have been all wrong for him. For one thing, Sam didn't suffer fools I wouldn't even say gladly but at all, and suffering fools is, inevitably, a serious part of such a job. Frank Hodsoll may not have known much about the arts—an attorney and full-time public servant, he would sometimes treat us to lectures on the meaning of the avant-garde that, in the power of their tedium, could stop a race riot—but, as chairman, he was a courtly and kindly man. When someone on the Council finished speaking, no matter how high the quotient of idiocy in his or her talk, Frank would always say, quite as if he meant it, "Thank you, Francine." I once told Sam that he could never accomplish that part of the job—the "Thank you, Francine" could never get past his lips. He agreed it could be a problem.

Nor did Sam have the temperament for compromise. I, for one, am rather glad he didn't. Like the rest of us, however, Sam had his self-deceptions. One of these was his mistaken belief in himself as a public politician. In fact, he was quite good as a behind-the-scenes politician, and he regularly cut successful deals at the NEA on such matters as who would be given presidential medals in the arts and who wouldn't. (I used to tease him about these medals, which I thought a bad idea, asking if he was planning to get one for the Harmonicats.)

Sam was a man of great appetite. He not only took great pleasure in food, but wanted to acquire and devour all the good books, hear all the music (in, let me add, all its various performances), meet all the interesting people. (When he wrote about the new *Grove Dictionary of Music* for *Commentary*, he felt he had to own and study that estimable work in all its editions.) Somehow, such was his wondrous energy, it all seemed possible.

When Sam was struck by cancer in 1990—and, not long after, by a heart attack—it seemed all the crueller because his very being depended on a flow of the most extraordinary energy. Sam without this energy seemed not oxymoronic, or a contradiction, or anything but an impossibility. The truth was that his leukemia—and it was leukemia with all the most ghastly tortures thrown in, except bone-marrow transplant, which his weakened heart prevented—though it slowed his energy, didn't alter his restlessness.

The new instrument Sam began to play was the telephone. After our days at the NEA together, days that for me will always be defined by his presence, Sam and I stayed in touch chiefly through telephone calls. He was too impatient to write letters, or to wait for them; the FAX machine seems to me invented just for Sam, whose patience had long been too sorely tried by the mails. He didn't call me as frequently as I know he called others, but when his health held up I would often get four or five long-distance calls a week, never at set or predictable times. These calls invariably began with the following staccato exchange: "Joe. Sam." "Hi, Sam." "Good time?" (He was unfailingly courteous in asking that question.) "A fine time." And we'd be off.

Sam's telephone calls usually lasted forty or fifty minutes, and they sometimes put to the test Mae West's dictum that you cannot get too much of a good thing. The calls themselves were pure Sam: filled with information, vituperation, often odd but always impressive cogitation. Typically, they might include White House gossip, a Rosina Lhévinne anecdote, a Jewish joke, an item about Matthew Arnold's theological assumptions, an often wild political prediction, and anything else that was on Sam's mind at the moment. And there was always a vast amount on Sam's mind.

When Sam sensed that I had run out of conversational gas, or when I had exhausted such information as I had that was likely to be of interest to him, there would be a pause, then "*Hokay*," he would say, signing off, and hang up. I was generally ready for a

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walk around the room or a cup of tea or a nap after such a call. Sam, I assumed, had four or five more such calls to make after he had finished with me.

Because he was so forthright, Sam was one of those men whom, in order to like him, you had *really* to like him. His aggressiveness might have put you off, or what could sometimes be his genuine touchiness might as easily put him off you. I really liked him. In fact, I loved being Sam's friend—loved having so talented a man who was also my contemporary as a close friend. I felt that, in becoming his friend, I was admitted to a small but select club—that of the people Sam felt he could count on. Sam, an only son who himself had an only son, was intensely a family man, and he had a way of making you feel that you were part of his family, with some of the responsibilities pertaining thereto: no betrayals of any kind allowed, we stick together, we count on one another in the clutch. None of this was ever said; it didn't have to be. It was at times an obligation being Sam's friend but it was always an honor, and I hope I never gave him cause to think I let him down.

Since Sam's death, I have thought about the pattern in his life, searching, in Henry James's phrase, for the figure in Sam's carpet. I believe the figure is to be found in Sam's courage, which was courage of a particular kind—the courage of the underdog. I think of the courage it must have taken for that dark-eyed beautiful eight-year-old boy of *Ostjuden* ancestry to go on the concert stage lashed to that most powerfully complex of musical instruments, the piano; the courage even as a tennis player to be the scrambler that Sam was—a player, that is, not of first-class gifts, who had to fight for every bloody point; the courage to mount a career as a concert performer and the no lesser courage to understand that, despite his victories as a pianist, he had to walk away from it because he could not have the kind of career at the piano he wanted; the courage to begin, at forty, a new career as a music critic in which he confronted the musical establishment of his day; the courage to join with Hilton Kramer in beginning a new journal to take on, in effect, all of contemporary American culture in its dominant, one might say mainstream, antinomian strain; the courage to grapple, weekend after weekend, with a roomful of people in argument over the importance of art; the courage, finally, to stage his uncomplaining fight against cancer in one of its most horrendous forms.

I suppose that Sam died believing that, unlike his hero T. E. Lawrence, he never got to ride triumphantly into Aqaba. Yet Sam took each battle as it came, and he notched his own string of victories, by acting with honor and courage whenever those difficult qualities were called for. One of the few regrets I have about my friendship with Sam is that, before he died, I neglected to tell him that he had never been other than true to his own heroic conception of himself; and, in my eyes, a hero he shall always remain.

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Steinbeck remembered

by James W. Tuttleton

So completely has John Steinbeck (1902–1968) disappeared from academic courses in the twentieth-century American novel that it comes as something of a shock to be reminded that he was one of the most popular and beloved novelists of his time. Every writer probably suffers some drop in attention in the decades after his death. It is part of the inevitable fluctuation of literary reputations on a stock market of sorts where a writer survives—or doesn't. Even when a good writer dies, the common reader (supposing that such a fiction exists) seems quite ready to turn away. A great many people appear to agree with Emerson, who put it with finality that "power ceases in the instant of repose" and that "only living avails, not the having lived." We want the novelty of what our contemporaries can give us. When Steinbeck died in 1968, many thought there was nothing more to be expected from that quarter; the author of *The Grapes of Wrath* was dead; the worlds created by his imagination had come to an end. Where to? What next?

In accounting for the sag in Steinbeck's reputation, it does him no injustice to remember that a great many new novelists have appeared since his death. Alice Walker, E. L. Doctorow, William Gaddis, Thomas Pynchon, and Toni Morrison all have a current academic following. Hearing about them, the common reader may seek power and vitality in their work. Academics—even those few not driven by extraliterary ideology—feel a commendable obligation to take such newcomers into account. Are these novelists, in comparison with Steinbeck, worth taking into account? Here, as in the field of contemporary poetry, the canon—at least insofar as professors have an influence—is in the process of taking shape. Creative achievements are being analyzed and weighed, evaluative rankings established. Much of the time, alas, these evaluations are not made on aesthetic grounds and cannot be trusted. But there is nothing new in this: Steinbeck's own novels were often praised for the wrong reasons.

We are reminded of how popular Steinbeck was by the publication of two new books, Jay Parini's *John Steinbeck: A Biography*,[1] and the first of a multi-volume Steinbeck edition in the Library of America series. The Library's first volume, *Novels and Stories, 1932–1937*,[2] comprises the California fiction of the early period and includes *The Pastures of Heaven* (1932), *To a God Unknown* (1933), *Tortilla Flat* (1935), *In Dubious Battle* (1936), and *Of Mice and Men* (1937). It is my expectation that these books will gain Steinbeck new readers, readers whose admiration will challenge the academic powerbrokers who have dismissed him. In any case, one is glad

1 *John Steinbeck: A Biography*, by Jay Parini; Holt, 536 pages, $30.

2 *John Steinbeck: Novels and Stories, 1932–1937*, edited by Robert DeMott and Elaine A. Steinbeck; The Library of America, 909 pages, $35.

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to have this volume, and one looks forward to the second volume in 1997, which is slated to include *The Long Valley* (1938), *Their Blood Is Strong* (1938), *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939), and *The Log from the "Sea of Cortez"* (1941). I hope the Library will also find room for *Cannery Row* (1945) and its sequel, *Sweet Thursday* (1954), as well as *The Pearl* (1947), *The Wayward Bus* (1947), *East of Eden* (1952), and *The Winter of Our Discontent* (1961).

Steinbeck was of course a journalist as well as a novelist, and much of the popularity of his fiction lay in an accessible style shaped by the deadlines and stylistic demands of newspaper and magazine editors. While a great many modernist masters—Joyce, Faulkner, Nabokov—"darkened" the matter of their prose and re-created the English sentence in difficult, complex, and even tortuous rhetoric and syntax, Steinbeck sought the pure well of English undefiled. Hemingway was his contemporary model, but, for a Stanford dropout, Steinbeck was exceptionally well-read in the classic English writers from the Middle Ages onward. In fact, he was perhaps too well-read in medieval literature, which long preoccupied him without yielding important results. In any case, Steinbeck also wrote some memorable nonfiction works like the *Sea of Cortez* (1941), a long meditation on marine biology, human nature, and the ends and means of existence; *A Russian Journal* (1948), an account of his postwar tour of the Soviet Union and his political observations about Communism and democracy; *Travels with Charley in Search of America* (1962) and *America and Americans* (1966), sociological reportage based on Steinbeck's wide-ranging travels across the country.

While most readers will connect him with *The Grapes of Wrath*, the earlier novels and stories in the new Library of America edition are vintage Steinbeck texts. *The Pastures of Heaven* was not his first book (*Cup of Gold* preceded it in 1929). But the tale importantly explored what happens in a valley of prosperous farmers, a rather lush utopian setting, when the Munroe family moves in. A train of evils, a sequence of disasters—not all attributable to the Munroes—is somehow set in motion. Beneath it and intermixed into the action is an obscure sense that evil may arise on its own and is somehow a necessary element in the evolution of the good, an idea Steinbeck had derived from John Elof Boodin's *Cosmic Evolution*.

I can still recollect the impact on me, at age eighteen, of *To a God Unknown*. In this tale a deranged farmer—not unlike the God-intoxicated Jesse Bentley in Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio*—begins to believe that a large stone on his homestead is a sacred altar upon which he must make live sacrifices in order to lift a curse on his family and his infertile land. He is himself, of course, the last sacrifice that he must make. At the time I read it, I knew nothing about Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922) or Sir James Frazer's *The Golden Bough*, which lay behind it. But Steinbeck manifestly did, and, in Joseph Wayne of *To a God Unknown*, Steinbeck brought alive a pagan mind unconsciously steeped in forgotten vegetation ceremonies and dark fertility rituals. Steinbeck was far from a simple realist, and his work, from the very beginning, reflected an attraction to primitivism, the animistic, and the mysterious chthonic forces of the world.

I shall say little about *Of Mice and Men*, which—in the story of George and his retarded friend Lennie—has attained the status of a minor classic; it is a tale known, no doubt, to nearly every literate American. Nor can I linger here over *Tortilla Flat*, except to note that in it Steinbeck was moving toward the idea of a group code and its effect on individuals. He sometimes called the believers in such a code a "phalanx" and, in this story of Danny, the Pirate, Pilon, Jesus Maria, and Big Joe Portagee, he represented their code as a version of the loyalty that defines the chivalric code of King Arthur and the Round Table. Naturally there is defection and betrayal in *Tortilla Flat*, the dispersal of the group, and Steinbeck's *paisanos* wind up alone and consequently diminished. Steinbeck's several treatments of the middle-class dreams of his winsome Mon-

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terey down-and-outers, the affection and whimsy in his account of their poverty, their manners, and their values, made me, at a tender age, a temporary believer in the whore with a heart of gold, in the good-hearted thief, in the innate virtue of the socially dispossessed. The life of the *paisanos*, the pastimes of the wino and the bum, the genial openness of the hookers at Dora's and The Bear Flag in *Cannery Row* were so realistic in description and dialogue that one hardly noticed that they were the stuff of unabashed romance.

The idea of the phalanx, or the power of a group with a code, also underlies *In Dubious Battle*, Steinbeck's narrative of a strike in the mid-1930s of apple-pickers in the California orchards. Based on actual capital-labor violence at the time, the novel traced the fusion of individuals into a group, here the union, and dramatized the effect on them of the sense of solidarity that union membership conferred. The same feeling of solidarity comes to animate the Okies in *The Grapes of Wrath* as the Joads try to extend their sense of the phalanx code from "the fambly" to the larger unit of mankind as a whole. Steinbeck's preoccupation in these two novels was manifestly sociological, and it was natural for readers to infer that he was a leftist. He did little to discourage this notion, since he was indignant at the squalor, disease, and brutality that afflicted the migrant workers and the dispossessed. It only made him madder when the big landowners accused him of being a "red," set the police on him, and got the FBI to investigate him. He was denounced in Oklahoma and condemned as a radical and some of the California novels made him *persona non grata* in Monterey.

But Steinbeck was really never sympathetic to socialism or Communism. He told George Albee that for *In Dubious Battle* he had "used a small strike in an orchard valley as the symbol of man's eternal, bitter warfare with himself":

> I'm not interested in strike as means of raising men's wages, and I'm not interested in ranting about justice and oppression, mere outcroppings which indicate the condition. But man hates something in himself. He has been able to defeat every natural obstacle, but himself he cannot win over unless he kills every individual. And this self-hate, which goes so closely in hand with self-love, is what I wrote about.

The new Steinbeck biography by Jay Parini, a poet and a professor of English at Middlebury College, was inspired by a deep affection for the novels. This feeling shines through the text and succeeds in making us like the man as much as Parini does. He has made expert use of the Steinbeck papers at Stanford, has interviewed many who knew the novelist, and has actually read the Steinbeck critics and so can give us an account of the prevailing academic assessments. Neither a pathographer nor a shill for his subject, Parini analyzes Steinbeck's behavior with commendable sympathy and passes judgment with remarkable even-handedness. Parini gives an engaging account of Steinbeck's childhood in Salinas, California, of his middle-class parents and the life they gave their children. Steinbeck's shy disposition, his rebellious streak, his brooding personality, his budding artistic ambition, and his developing devotion to the craft of fiction are all narrated here with remarkable clarity. Steinbeck was not a man of great intellectual complexity, and the biography is faithful to the simplicity of its subject. But his emotional and artistic lives were much in turmoil, and the complexities of the writer's inner self deserve perhaps a deeper investigation than they receive here. In any case, the inward life of Steinbeck provides much of the drama of the biography.

Parini's account of Steinbeck's three marriages and their connection to the fiction is tactfully handled. Stories like "The Snake," *East of Eden*, and the oft-transformed Camelot matter (with Guinevere and Launcelot's betrayal of Arthur) have always intrigued me as variations of an edenic situation brought to ruin by the sexual treachery of women. (This is even the case in *Of Mice and Men*,

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where Curly's wanton wife triggers the end of George and Lennie's dream of having their own homestead.) Feminists have complained about this aspect of Steinbeck's work, supposing that it reflects the stale literary stereotype. But the source of the power of this theme becomes clearer in Parini's new life.

Steinbeck's first marriage, to Carol Henning, disintegrated after she had an affair in 1932 with one of Steinbeck's closest friends, a young unemployed scholar named Joseph Campbell. Campbell was immersed at the time in Frazer, the legends of the Fisher King, and the matter that would become *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* and *The Masks of God*. Steinbeck and Campbell had long conversations about this material, and clearly the novelist infused some of it into *To a God Unknown*. The novelist did not know at the time, however, that Campbell was "following his bliss" by seducing Carol Steinbeck. When Steinbeck found out, the trust on which he had based his marriage crumbled. Something of the same thing seems to have happened in his second marriage, to Gwyn Conger. The Arthurian betrayal, so richly recounted in Malory, seemed to have played itself out, twice, in Steinbeck's life.

Of course Steinbeck was no Arthur, and married life with him must have been difficult in the early years. He was remote in temperament, and—when the fit of writing was on him, which was most of the time—he lived exclusively in the world of the imagination. He would withdraw into his room or writing shed and not come out for long periods. He often looked right through people who were trying to talk to him. At times he lived only in the book he was composing. Loneliness and isolation in the beginning and then a fame that excluded the wife were difficult for the wives to tolerate. But Steinbeck's third marriage, to Elaine Scott, was everything for both of them that a marriage ought to be, or so it seems to Parini.

In other respects, and for all his shyness, Steinbeck was lucky in his friendships. He had a massive inferiority complex and could never believe in his own success. It boggled his mind to win the Pulitzer and Nobel Prizes, which he thought he did not deserve. This humility in the man was expressed in a relaxed, casual, down-home frankness that others found appealing. His string of best-sellers—and the fabulous movie contracts they brought—made him immensely wealthy, and his fame caused celebrities in their own right to seek him out. Chief among his friends was Ed Ricketts, the marine biologist who is the model of Doc in *Cannery Row* and *Sweet Thursday*. He enflamed Steinbeck's imagination and set him in search of the patterns in life that reveal the hidden secrets of organisms like man and insisted on an objective perspective he called "non-teleological" thinking; he even became Steinbeck's collaborator, on the *Sea of Cortez*. Another close friend was Pat Covici, his editor for more than thirty years, who worked wonders in drawing out of him his best work. But the list of close friends is simply too long: Fred Allen, Adlai Stevenson, LBJ, Robert Capa, Charlie Chaplin, John Kenneth Galbraith, Harry and Alicia Guggenheim, Dag Hammarskjöld, John Huston, Henry Fonda, Terrence McNally, Burgess Meredith, Arthur Miller, Spencer Tracy, Jack Valenti, Harold Guinzburg, and countless others whose names are not as familiar.

Steinbeck's defense of detached non-teleological thinking infuriated left-wing literary critics in the 1930s, for they wanted to draft Steinbeck into their own political campaign. At the heart of the matter was the writer's attitude toward individualism. The attack on individualism in America was rampant in the Depression years of the 1930s. Stalin had admonished all American writers to hasten the collapse of capitalism and inaugurate the proletarian revolution. Even writers who had no interest in politics as such were sucked into the romance of collectivism. Archibald MacLeish, certainly no leftist, was not alone in calling individualism an inappropriate theme for contemporary literature. Writing in "Nevertheless One Debt" (1931), MacLeish said:

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> Unless poetry can not only perceive, but also *feel*, the race of men to be more important than any one man, we are merely fighting back against the water. And it is not an easy thing to feel. It involves the surrender of almost all of our inherited and instinctive preferences. . . . It is no longer A MAN against the stars. It is Mankind: that which has happened always to all men, not the particular incidents of particular lives. . . . Not the "great," the "leaders," the brass-voices, but these men, these lives, and now death taking them. Not myself, my soul, my glycerine-dropping eyes, but these unknown and nameless men, anonymous under this sky, small in these valleys and far-off and forever there.

The prose is purple, as was the sentimental glorification of the masses. But everybody was doing it. Even Hemingway ends *To Have and Have Not* (1937) with the notion that a man alone ain't got no chance. "The people of the earth, the family of man"—that was the ticket for socialist writers like Carl Sandburg in *The People, Yes* (1936).

Steinbeck, it seems to me, was caught up in this romance of the collective. But his interest in it as a political phenomenon was less than its uses to him as a key to how—on the basis of feelings—groups form, establish codes of living for the time, and then dissolve when they are no longer needed, or disintegrate from some internal betrayal, or are broken up by some external force. However they begin and end, these codes come into conflict with others and are fraught with drama—just the stuff of the novel. While Steinbeck sympathized with the abject condition of the California laborers and the dispossessed Okies, Communism or socialism was no answer, for him, to the problem of politics. He shows the Communist strike organizers in *In Dubious Battle* to be willing to ruthlessly sacrifice the workers to the Party agenda. And, when it comes to what the Okies want and need, it is not the dole, welfare handouts, or government camps like "Weedpatch." What Ma Joad and her family need and want—and what the novel finally comes down for—is forty arable acres and a mule. They want independence, economic self-sufficiency, their own home. They want, in other words, what Jefferson prescribed as the social and economic ideal that would best support the political model of republican politics.

This viewpoint was lost on a number of leftist critics who were so avid for one decent proletarian novelist that, when Steinbeck came along, they appropriated *In Dubious Battle* and *The Grapes of Wrath* virtually without inspection. Then, when Steinbeck perversely insisted on other themes in *Cannery Row*, *The Pearl*, and *Sweet Thursday*, he was viciously attacked by Party hacks in the Soviet Union and here at home. Pathological characters, mental degenerates, excessive preoccupation with biology and sex—these could not be accommodated to the principles of socialist realism and revolutionary criticism. But from the very beginning to the later *Short Reign of Pippin IV: A Fabrication* (1957) and even to the posthumously published *The Acts of King Arthur and His Noble Knights* (1976), Steinbeck, as Jay Parini rightly puts it, "was obsessed by magic, by chants, by knightly quests, by [individual] heroism." The element of primitivism in his work, his celebration of heroic individuals, and his suspicion of political manipulators—none of this was likely to effect the revolution. From the outset Steinbeck insisted on the individual's right to criticize the group. Perhaps the clearest expression of Steinbeck's political sense is to be found in this passage from *East of Eden*, which forms not only the moral center of the novel but Steinbeck's credo as well:

> That the free, exploring mind of the individual human is the most valuable thing in the world. And this I would fight for: the freedom of the mind to take any direction it wishes, undirected. And this I must fight against: any idea, religion or government which limits or destroys the individual. This is what I am and what I am about. I can understand why a system built on a pattern must try to destroy the

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> free mind, for this is the one thing which can by inspection destroy such a system. Surely I can understand this, and I hate it and I will fight against it to preserve the one thing that separates us from the uncreative beasts. If the glory can be killed, we are lost.

Because of his belief in individual freedom, Steinbeck was an enemy of totalitarian régimes which undertook to subvert and destroy it. *The Moon Is Down* (1942), a brief but effective portrayal of the ordeal of a democratic people under a brutal occupation, made him immensely popular in Nazi-occupied Europe. When Steinbeck went to Copenhagen in 1946, after World War II, a newspaper headline read "JOHN STEINBECK, ALL OF DENMARK IS AT YOUR FEET." In fact, wherever he went—in France, Italy, Eastern Europe—a like reception greeted him: people crowded the bookstores and restaurants hoping to catch sight of him. He had made it possible for them to endure the miserable occupation and live with courage and hope.

His opposition to the political Left was so intense that he commended his friend Elia Kazan for exposing the Communist infiltration of the movie industry. And, later, when the Vietnam War broke out, he expressed full sympathy with the aims and purposes of the United States government. He counted himself a personal friend of President Johnson, as indeed he was, and wrote a series of articles for *Newsday* in defense of the American effort to rescue South Vietnam. His son John was stationed there at the time. And, although he was too old for the job, Steinbeck even got into Vietnam as a war correspondent, slogged through rice paddies with the platoons, flew combat missions with helicopter crews of the First Cavalry, and once was nearly captured by the North Vietnamese army. While most American intellectuals were subverting this effort, Steinbeck even got off a round of rockets from the air. The Young Communist League newspaper *Komsomolskaya Pravda* called him "an accessory to crime" and the American "Comsymps," as they were called in those days, immediately fell into line. The left-wing American media never forgave Steinbeck for seeing the North Vietnamese Communists as a threat to democracy everywhere.

Jay Parini thinks that Steinbeck was misguided in his politics, that it was somehow unfair of the House Un-American Activities Committee to have inquired into the identities of those Hollywood celebrities who had wished to subvert the American government by means of force. As for Vietnam, Parini thinks that Steinbeck was guilty of "misguided loyalty" to the president and that he "fell hook, line, and sinker for an old-style patriotism that argued one must support one's country in a time of war, even if the war in question happened to be immoral and foolish." This trivializes and misrepresents Steinbeck's ideas. While he manifestly supported the war effort, eventually, like everyone else, he came to see that the war was unwinnable with the existing policies and personnel in place. Immoral the war was not. Foolish it became when it was not fully prosecuted by the politicians.

Steinbeck was absolutely right in saying, toward the end, that the U.S. "could lick the daylights out of North Vietnam in about two weeks if we went in like we did in World War II." If such had been the American policy, Vietnam would no doubt be much better off today, not to speak of the moral health of this country. As it is, the North Vietnamese victors destroyed the economy, suppressed religion, crushed freedom of expression, punished all dissent, and brutalized their own people. From every conceivable point of view the country is now bankrupt. We can take some comfort from the fact that the legacy of a totalitarian strongman like Ho Chi Minh was not visited on Panama, Grenada, and Kuwait.

However much critics on the left may have disliked Steinbeck's politics, he has outlived or transcended his detractors and is still immensely popular with common readers. The reasons are not far to seek. He was a born storyteller of vividly interesting

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tales. His capacity to bring alive realistic scenes and authentic speech was really quite exceptional. He wove into his tales a number of provocative theories without turning himself into an arid novelist of ideas. His attraction to the fabulous and the fairy tale gave his work a simplicity attractive to the young. And the hidden complexities at the heart of some of his archetypal, mythic, and fabulous situations have appealed to a great many more sophisticated readers.

Steinbeck did not think he deserved the success that came to him. But about how many other novelists can it be said what we can say of the author of *The Grapes of Wrath*: that a half century after its publication, the book still sells fifty thousand copies a year. Such a fact transcends considerations of mere commerce and trade. It speaks to a literary vision and an artistic accomplishment simply beyond the capacity of most writers.

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"Russian village suite"
by Daniel Mark Epstein

---

after Marc Chagall

I. Listening to the cock

When the world was still
Upside down in slumber
And trees seemed to hang
From the night clouds,
And the claw of the moon
Scratched between silences,
I heard the crow of the cock.
I heard the cock sing
And it was not for day,
Or for night he was crowing—
It was for life.
I heard him cry for
Dear life which was coiled
Inside him like a hen
Full of eggs while
High above in the night
The barnyard animals
All dreamed of living
The lonely lives of men.

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II. The revolution

O Nikolay, what a show
You have made for the crowd!
You are a living flagpole
For the banner of Revolution!
All eyes are upon you
As you play the acrobat,
Standing on one hand
While the flag waves from your legs!
All the world is watching,
Armies, children and lovers
As you stand on one hand
On the table where a rabbi
Sits holding the scroll of the law.
All eyes are upon you, all
But the rabbi's weary eye.

III. The three candles

Harlequin tunes his flute
To play for the wedding
A song of blood and fire,
A song to make the dead
Happily dance with the living.
Angels with violins glide
Over the chapel dome
Serenading the groom and bride
As they walk above the earth.
A shady angel unrolls
The red carpet for lovers,
The living and dead, to dance
As they pass from innocence
On this path of blood and fire.

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IV. White crucifixion

Lions above the arc
Rise up roaring in pain
As a tongue of yellow flame
Blows from the temple door.
Why is the temple on fire?
Why are the books on fire?
Why must a bearded scholar
Shouldering the sack of Time
Warm his hands at this fire
Of the white scroll of the Law?
Why is our village burning?
In the stream of heaven's light
The flying dead hide their eyes,
Whispering at the vision:
One of their own on the cross,
His lean and tormented loins
Wrapped in a ragged tallis.

V. The fiddler

When in the night the fiddler
Flies over the town
Scattering notes like silver,
Tuning birds to a chorus;
When in the night the fiddler
Crosses the strings with his bow,
The church spires stand on tip-toe
To listen, the whistling trees
Shake off the dust of snow;
The stars rub their eyes,
And shake off the night clouds.
And I wish I had three heads,
Three sets of ears to hear
The golden and green melodies
Of the fiddler as he goes by
Leaving footprints on the sky.

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VI. In the night

If God ever speaks to me
It will be on a night like this,
A snowy night in January.
We will be embracing
In the middle of the street,
So dearly in each other's arms
A lonely man in his doorway
May warm himself at our fire. Yes
It will be such a night as this
That I'll hear God's voice,
A night when there is such light
From the knife of the moon
The snowflakes all around us
Tremble: stars taken by surprise.

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Art

The naïve & the modern: Horace Pippin & Jacob Lawrence

by Karen Wilkin

Is it chance or design that brings major exhibitions by Horace Pippin and Jacob Lawrence to New York at more or less the same time—the retrospective "I Tell My Heart: The Art of Horace Pippin" at the Metropolitan Museum[1] and "Jacob Lawrence: The Migration Series" at the Museum of Modern Art?[2] (There's no question about how or why the concurrent survey of Lawrence's work from 1936 to 1994 at Midtown Payson Galleries was arranged, not that it wasn't an excellent addition to the equation.) From my experience of how institutions like the Met and MOMA work, I suspect chance, although in many ways, the coincidence is provocative enough, if only for the questions it raises, to have warranted deliberate planning.

On the surface, there appear to be good reasons for putting substantial groups of paintings by Pippin and Lawrence in close proximity. They are both, after all, distinguished African-American artists, albeit a generation and a half apart. (Pippin was born in 1888 and died in 1946; Lawrence was born in 1917.) Both were represented in New York by the legendary Edith Halpert at the Downtown Gallery, and in 1946 they were shown together, along with Richmond Barthé, in a special exhibition, "Three Negro Artists," at the Phillips Memorial Gallery in Washington. Lawrence is quoted by Judith E. Stein, the curator of the Pippin show, as saying that he believes, in retrospect, that the older painter's "content and his form must have made some impression on me . . . Horace Pippin would have been a person I would have looked at more than others"—admittedly, not an unconditional declaration of influence, but an indication of awareness and interest. As Stein points out, Lawrence had already found his distinctive voice when he first saw Pippin's work at the Downtown Gallery in 1941, but it's clear that the two artists share certain similarities of approach. Both draw upon the particulars of African-American experience as subject matter in

1 "I Tell My Heart: The Art of Horace Pippin" opened at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, on February 1, 1995, and remains on view through April 30. The show was organized by the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts and was first seen there last winter; it then traveled to Chicago, Cincinnati, and Baltimore. A catalogue, by Judith E. Stein and with essays by Cornel West, Judith Wilson, and others, has been published by the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts and Universe Publishing (210 pages, $40; $24.95 paper).

2 "Jacob Lawrence: The Migration Series" opened at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, on January 12, 1995, and remains on view through April 11. The show was organized by Elizabeth Hutton Turner of the Phillips Collection, Washington, D.C., and was first seen there last winter; it has traveled widely, and after it closes at MOMA will be seen in Atlanta, Denver, and Chicago. A catalogue, with essays by Henry Louis Gates, Jr., and others, has been published by the Rappahannock Press and the Phillips Collection (172 pages, $40; $25 paper).

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their art, both use a vocabulary of sharp-edged, intensely colored, unmodulated shapes, both stage complex dramas—domestic as well as public—with an extraordinary economy of means, and both are intimists who prefer to work on a modest scale.

Sometimes there's an enriching dialogue between Pippin's and Lawrence's pictures, between, for example, Pippin's images of memories of his childhood and Lawrence's imaginative reconstructions of the history of his people. Pippin's engaging genre scenes of the life of ordinary black Americans at the turn of the century—paintings of Saturday-night baths, pipe-smoking women with bandanna-wrapped heads, children bundled two to a bed, families at bare kitchen tables—are among his strongest, most firmly structured works, and his most inventive in terms of color. With their carefully catalogued washtubs, woodstoves, clocks, oil lamps, and water buckets, and their stylized figures locked into rather bleak interiors enlivened only by strategically placed, brilliant rag rugs and kerchiefs, the best of these pictures can remind you of Persian miniatures, domesticated and translated into an unmistakably American idiom. They bring Pippin's firsthand recollections to life and serve as vivid footnotes to Lawrence's emblematic distillations of the recent and not so recent history of African-Americans in this country—"The Migration Series" is his early masterpiece in this vein—complex narratives, like updated vernacular versions of High Baroque history paintings, based like their high-minded predecessors as much on scrupulous research as on direct experience. (I'm not at all certain what Lawrence, one of the most unpretentious people alive, will make of this comparison, but it is meant simply to underscore the seriousness and ambition of his narrative sequences.) Pippin's works can serve to flesh out Lawrence's elliptical, condensed references to a world he knows principally from other people's descriptions, but that corresponds to Pippin's own memories.

Yet despite these connections and overlaps, the differences between the two artists—particularly the differences between their backgrounds and formations—are overwhelming. Pippin was a small-town boy, raised in rural Pennsylvania and Orange County, New York, whose experience of travel came largely from his service in the First World War; he spent most of his adult life in the town where he spent a large part of his childhood. Lawrence, who moved to New York with his family when he entered his teens, has traveled widely, even working for an extended period in Africa. Pippin was an authentic naïf, a late starter, almost entirely self-taught, who began to paint initially as therapy for a shoulder disabled by a serious war wound; in spite of the appeal of his work to admirers of modernism (like that of other naïve artists, perhaps most notably Henri Rousseau), his immediate sources had nothing to do with what used to be called High Art. Lawrence, quite the opposite, is a sophisticated, knowledgeable painter, a child of the Harlem Renaissance, whose gifts were recognized early on, encouraged, and nurtured by a series of professional artists.

In the end, the concurrence of the Pippin and Lawrence exhibitions serves to emphasize how fundamentally different each artist is from the other, to underscore their individual characters. It is clear, for example, that while Lawrence is truly inspired by his research into the past, Pippin is at his best when he draws entirely on his own recollections. The most convincing paintings in "I Tell My Heart" are clearly evocations of memory: stark, near-monochromes of war-battered French farmhouses reduced to essential geometry, lively re-creations of childhood life at home or in the streets, evocative scenes of rain or glorious autumn hunting weather. In these works, Pippin demonstrates a strong sense of two-dimensional design and a gift for simplified but telling detail. He is far less convincing when he bases his works on magazine photographs, as he does in a number of singularly lumpish portraits, or on what seems to have been calendar art. The exceptions are a handful

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of weird religious pictures, possibly more compelling for their eerie mood than for their formal inventiveness, and some loopily charming animal pictures, Pippin's answer to Edward Hicks's celebrated *Peaceable Kingdom*. (As the catalogue makes clear, Pippin certainly knew Hicks's picture—more than sixty versions exist—thanks to his Philadelphia dealer and early champion, Robert Carlen.)

The only other exception to the evident superiority of Pippin's paintings based on personal recollections is a boldly graphic, almost Hartley-esque winter landscape, *The Buffalo Hunt* (1933, Whitney Museum of American Art), a spiky, energetic picture that manages to transform completely what seems to have been a fairly banal model. Most curious, however, are the rather leaden flower paintings and formal interiors that only occasionally show any of the structural invention or the effective orchestration of color and pattern of Pippin's best childhood interiors. The catalogue discussion of these works makes much of the significance (in the semiotic sense) of the objects depicted—antimacassars, vases, statuary—as attributes of white affluence, opposed to the bare essential furnishings of the scenes of black-American life. It's all probably true, but subject matter isn't the only thing that makes these pictures more compelling than the ones of Victorian parlors.

The catalogue made me aware of how much better Pippin's works usually look in reproduction than in the flesh. Reproductions have no surface problems and the paintings often have acute ones, a kind of ham-fisted amateur paint handling that occasionally suggests intense feeling, but more often seems the mark of a desperate struggle. In the show, the juxtaposition of a handsome preparatory drawing and a finished painting of children playing out-of-doors makes the gap between Pippin's intentions and his capabilities quite plain; contours are far more subtle, shapes more inventive in the drawing than in the finished work, as though a responsive pencil permitted the artist nuances that were swallowed up by the sheer density of oil paint. The drawing is delightful and makes you wish more had been included. I'm not at all convinced that I think more highly of Horace Pippin for having seen "I Tell My Heart." I suspect that he's one of those artists who seems more accomplished when his works are seen one at a time.

The opposite is true of Jacob Lawrence. I remember going to see the retrospective of his work organized by the Seattle Art Museum when it came to the Brooklyn Museum in 1987 with no firm idea of what to expect. I had seen individual works by the painter over the years, some of which interested me far more than others, and had met the man and found him impressive, but I had no sense of a whole career. I came away enormously impressed by the consistency of Lawrence's effort and of his achievement. Subsequent encounters with his work have reinforced this. It's clear that since his debut at age twenty in a 1937 exhibit of the Harlem Artists Guild, Lawrence has remained faithful to a precise set of themes: moments, both important and quotidian, from African-American history, scenes from a continuing struggle for equality, justice, and day-to-day survival, celebrations of domesticity, street life, and work in all its forms—all presented with the clarity and stop-time immediacy of modern-day icons. He's been called a *griot*, a storyteller who keeps alive the oral history of a culture, but it might be more accurate to call him a twentieth-century illuminator. Like his medieval and Renaissance predecessors, Lawrence vividly evokes actuality on an intimate scale, and usually on paper, with gouache, casein, and similar media, apparently delighting in the fluidity and opacity of his chosen materials, the crispness they permit, and the chalky, unmodulated brilliance of their color, placing all this in the service of pungent visual narratives, often made still more precise by written captions.

"The Migration Series" is paradigmatic of these characteristics. Painted in 1940–41, when Lawrence was twenty-three, it wasn't the first of the young painter's narrative

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cycles, although at sixty panels, it was his most ambitious. (He had already completed series based on the lives of Toussaint l'Ouverture, the liberator of Haiti, and the abolitionists Frederick Douglass and Harriet Tubman; these, like "The Migration Series," were based not on personal experience but on reading and research, much of it drawn from the collection that formed the core of the present-day Schomburg Center.) But migration north was part of Lawrence's family history—as it was for many of their friends and neighbors—which certainly colored both his conception and his realization of the theme. First shown at Edith Halpert's Downtown Gallery in 1941, the paintings were divided between the Museum of Modern Art and the Phillips Collection in 1942, with odd-numbered panels going to Washington, even-numbered ones remaining in New York. While a selection from both collections was included in Lawrence's retrospective, the present showing is the first time "The Migration Series" has been reunited completely since it was exhibited at MOMA in 1971.

Individual panels within the series are among Lawrence's most stripped-down, iconic works, each image distilling the complexities of its caption to graphic essentials. One caption reads: "The Negroes were given free passage on the railroads which was paid back by Northern industry. It was an agreement that the people brought North on the railroads were to pay back their passage after they had received jobs." The accompanying panel depicts the nose of a locomotive, complete with gleaming brass bell, smokestack, and headlight, as a flattened black silhouette against a dark blue, cloud-streaked sky. Potent as some single images are—a bare-torsoed man raising a massive hammer above a railroad spike, a trio of manacled men seen from the back against prison bars, the corner of an empty room built of bare boards—the cumulative effect of "The Migration Series" is even more potent. Lawrence subtly varies rhythms, viewpoints, scale, and density, sometimes stressing the lucid geometric underpinning of even his most complicated images, and sometimes packing the pictures with contrasting, intricate shapes. Sometimes he draws back to show us panoramas and crowds, while at others he zeroes in on an essential detail, and at still others invents abstract emblems for immense concepts. Throughout the series, the colors are earthy and dry, with warm, brushy browns predominating, set off by intense near-primaries, dull greens, and cool work-shirt blues. As you read along, you sense an internal pulse, accentuated by color harmonies, a slow, seemingly inexorable rhythm that keeps you moving, checking one panel against its predecessors and the ones to come, at the same time that you succumb to the sharp graphic appeal of single images. As in all of Lawrence's cycles, the narrative is absorbing, the text—written by the artist and as condensed and concise as his pictures—fascinating, but finally, it's not the subject matter but the pictorial invention that captures your imagination and holds your attention. It's aesthetic issues, not narrative, political, or sociological ones—the seamlessness of the artist's feelings about his subject and his ability to create highly simplified, legible images of that subject—that make this and Lawrence's other series so memorable.

Aesthetic issues, of course, are what ultimately define the gulf between Pippin and Lawrence. Paradoxically, any apparent resemblance between the work of the two painters is generated by the very thing that separates them most profoundly: their relationship to other art, particularly modernist art. There's no doubt, given the evidence of Lawrence's work, that he aspires to the intensity, the immediacy, the acuity of narrative, and the sense of deep feeling that inform Pippin's most successful works and, in general, the best naïve art. But these qualities can be found, as well, in much significant "schooled"—as opposed to naïve—art, both Academic and non-Academic, traditional and modernist. What is equally or even more important, Lawrence evidently

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aspires to the formal clarity, the structural economy, the reductiveness of shape, and the boldness of color relationships that are more particularly characteristic not only of the best naïve art but of a good deal of potent non-traditional (and often non-Western) art of many descriptions. Modernist taste has taught us to value highly the expressive simplifications of such work—esoterica such as Archaic, Byzantine, Romanesque, and trecento art, the geometric invention of African sculpture, and much more, including naïve art, once designated as crude or primitive—and to see their special qualities as desirable aesthetic possibilities, not as evidence of lack of skill. It's even arguable that, considerations of political correctness aside, it is only because of modernism's appetite for such qualities that it is possible for a Horace Pippin to be considered an artist in the first place, to say nothing of his work's being shown at the Metropolitan.

Jacob Lawrence, like many artists of his generation, consciously aims to achieve characteristics in his work that eyes educated by modernism recognize as virtues in naïve art. He pares down shapes, suppresses detail, emphasizes expressive silhouettes, intensifies color, tips space. Eyes educated by modernism immediately recognize this personal shorthand as a deliberate rejection of a familiar, time-honored (or time-worn) series of pictorial conventions. Pippin may seem to end up somewhere in Lawrence's territory, but he does so by default. He's just doing the best he can.

If I appear to be pointing out the obvious, I do so only because of the curious claims made for Pippin's art by David C. Driskell, Professor of Art at the University of Maryland, in his introduction to the catalogue of "I Tell My Heart." Driskell stresses how different Pippin's art was from that of "the other African-Americans of his time" (Pippin painted from 1930 until his death, at fifty-eight, in 1946), chiefly, it seems, because of his subject matter. Driskell describes the painter as relying for stimulation on "the lore of local people, including their interpretations of the Bible," as well as on "the history he read and the memories of his own experiences at home and abroad." Most important, according to Driskell, "throughout his career as a painter, Pippin remained at ease with the black experience at a time when many of his fellow artists were struggling to throw off the yoke of bondage evident in their art while at the same time attempting to make that art acceptable in style and form to an unyielding Euro-modernist art theory."

Of whom is Driskell thinking? Surely not William H. Johnson, born in South Carolina in 1901 but a Harlem resident after 1918, trained initially at the National Academy of Design by the free-thinking Charles W. Hawthorne to paint in a broad, light-struck manner somewhere between Post-Impressionism and the Ashcan School. Years spent in Europe made Johnson into a thoroughgoing modernist of the expressionist persuasion; by the 1930s, he was an accomplished painter of brooding, mysterious landscapes and portraits that are Soutine-like in their warped spaces and slashing brushstrokes, but no less personal because of this connection. After 1938, however, when Johnson reluctantly returned to the U.S. from Europe, his work became increasingly stylized and his themes almost exclusively drawn from black history and Harlem street life, for a fertile decade when he produced his most powerful and original pictures. (Tragically, he suffered a mental breakdown in 1948; hospitalized until his death in 1970, he was never able to paint again.) Asked about the change in his approach in an interview during a 1943 exhibition, Johnson replied, "It was not a change, but a development. In all my years of painting, I have had one absorbing and inspiring idea, and have worked towards it with unyielding zeal: to give—in simple and stark form—the story of the Negro as he has existed."

Nor can Driskell be thinking of Lawrence—a wholehearted admirer of Johnson's work—whose reputation was first established in the 1930s and whose "program"

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could easily be described in the same words that Johnson used or that Driskell used to categorize Pippin. Of course, there is nothing new about faulting black artists, trained or untrained, for not fulfilling preconceived ideas of what black art should look like; only the political subtext has changed. In Pippin's lifetime, his work was praised at the expense of that of the expatriate African-American, Henry Osawa Tanner. Tanner's mystical, Ryder-esque landscapes and religious paintings were compared unfavorably with Pippin's presumably more "primitive" and hence more authentic embodiments of the black experience; "like Negro spirituals" was a frequent term of admiring comparison when Pippin's work was first discussed. Is anyone else troubled by the connection between crudeness, lack of conventional painterly skill, "primitivism," and correct expression of African-Americanness implicit in these notions? Am I the only one who finds this condescending?

The issue of the relationship of modernism to the "primitive" is broached by the Metropolitan in a kind of footnote to the Pippin exhibition, a small installation of works from the permanent collection by artists, both naïve and trained, who addressed issues raised by naïve art in their work. It is a curious selection, including Grandma Moses and John Kane as well as Bill Traylor, a remarkable artist with an unfailing eye for placement and informative detail, who, born in slavery and raised to be a field hand, began drawing only toward the end of a life that spanned most of a century. Arnold Friedman and Jacob Lawrence are included among the non-naïves. Many others could have been, from Marsden Hartley to Ben Shahn—which raises the absorbing question of why Ben Shahn's heads and Horace Pippin's portraits share so many stylistic conventions, especially after Pippin's admirer, the notorious Albert Barnes, arranged for his protégé to have some formal art instruction. But as I said, some of the questions raised by the correspondence of the two exhibitions are at least as interesting as the shows themselves.

Both the Pippin and the Lawrence exhibitions are accompanied by ambitious catalogues that aim at providing an exhaustive context for both the artists and their work, technical information, and, in some cases, previously unpublished documentation. Both include contributions by stars of the African-American intellectual establishment, admittedly not always particularly known for their art-historical or art-critical expertise, including Cornel West, on Pippin, and Henry Louis Gates, Jr., on Lawrence; most of the catalogue essays, however, while sometimes jargon-riddled, are reasonably illuminating. The color reproductions and documentary photographs in both publications are surprisingly good, and the cumulative result of both, whatever reservations I may have about particular essays, is to provide an informative, enriching background for the work of both artists.

Ambiguous Baziotes

"William Baziotes: 32 Years Later"
at the Blum Helman Gallery, New York.
January 18–March 4, 1995

reviewed by Mario Naves

To mention the name William Baziotes (1912–1963) is to conjure up images of indeterminate spaces populated by enigmatic forms. If it can be said that a purposeful ambiguity informs Baziotes's work, "ambiguous" might also suffice as a description of the artist's reputation. While his paintings are usually associated with those of the Abstract Expressionists, a group of artists with whom he exhibited and fraternized, they don't quite fit the label. His work isn't "action painting": the patient scumbling of oils hardly constitutes the stuff of gestural bravado. And while he took an interest in the spiritual side of Abstract Expressionism (epitomized by painters like Mark Rothko and Clyfford Still) Baziotes's affiliation with it is, at best, tenuous.

Most significant, Baziotes was never really

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an abstract artist. His signature paintings deal with the figure, or, rather, the figurative. The biomorphic gremlins populating Baziotes's work stubbornly refuse to become mere signs; they have character and their animism is genuine. Consequently, Baziotes's brand of homegrown Surrealism remains too elusive for snug categorization, and his work is little seen nowadays in New York museums—perhaps curators consider him too much of an anomaly. Yet, one of the welcome ironies of historical hindsight is that he may prove to be a better painter than is currently acknowledged. But given the undeserved distinction bestowed upon painters like Jackson Pollock and Barnett Newman—artists who have been all but canonized in our museums—will anyone take notice?

Maybe. Such thoughts come to mind while viewing "William Baziotes: 32 Years Later" at the Blum Helman Gallery. Admittedly, such conjecture may be foolhardy in light of the attenuated nature of the exhibition. Can anyone judge an artist's work—let alone historical standing—from nineteen pieces, of which only five are mature paintings? Divided into three sections—early paintings, works-on-paper, and mature paintings—"32 Years Later" is a succinct retrospective. Maybe too succinct—it's practically over once one steps into the gallery. Those wanting a comprehensive overview of Baziotes's work would do better digging up old exhibition catalogues or magazine articles at their local library. "32 Years Later" does, however, invite the thought that such an overview may be warranted and even necessary.

Not that one would necessarily want to see more of the early work. Like almost every other modernist painter of note, Baziotes had to deal with Picasso, and his paintings that do so are, to be generous, unremarkable. *The Parachutist* (1944), for instance, may be of historical interest—having been exhibited at Peggy Guggenheim's Art of This Century Gallery—but its Cubist-derived compartmentalization is ungainly. Equally awkward are *Portrait of Ethel Baziotes*

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(1940) and *Girl with Snake* (1940), two works that take off from Picasso's *Girl Before a Mirror*. Similarly, a group of watercolor and gouache works-on-paper, dated between 1934 and 1939, are shaky in quality, reading like cartoon parodies of Picasso, although one piece of what could best be described as psychedelic fish has its goofy charms.

Still, these works have the power to engage us, if only because they give us glimpses of Baziotes's work to come. The swollen, fleshy figures in *Harlequin with Nude* (*c.* 1938–40) hint at biomorphism, as does the charcoal and conté-crayon drawing *Untitled (Flagellation)* (*c.* 1932–33), an image of a man whipping a woman amidst much scribbling. The drawing of the latter image is serviceable, as far as it goes, but it is only in the rendering of the whip that Baziotes's line goes beyond description. Anchoring the work by its verve, the whip lives as a presence (and, not coincidentally, as drawing) independent of its gestural moorings. One can readily imagine a variation of it inhabiting Baziotes's mature work. Indeed, it may well have.

It is Baziotes's mature paintings that are the cornerstone of "32 Years Later." While none can be considered a masterpiece—although it's easy to understand why MOMA thought *Pompeii* (1955) might be—together these five works make for one of the most satisfying exhibits seen in New York this season.

Deeply interested in Surrealism and its emphasis on the unconscious, Baziotes never strayed far from its roots. Revealing itself through an intuitive process not unrelated to automatism, his imagery bears the influence of Surrealism's painterly faction, especially the paintings of Joan Miró, an artist whose presence permeates Baziotes's work. The scrabbled elegance of Baziotes's line, in particular, is indebted to Miró, with the spidery blip seen in *The Flesh Eaters* (1952) serving as a veritable homage.

Baziotes's signature paintings are shifting fields of nocturnal light, shallow and dense. Inhabiting these spaces are organic forms, usually two or three per canvas, that recall insects, plant forms, microscopic organisms, glyphs, and calligraphy. Drawn to the universalism inherent in symbol and myth, Baziotes rarely lets particulars bog down his stock of characters. They are quirky and unpredictable, riddled with a weird lyricism that can be surprisingly moving. They can be endearing as well. The fetus-like blob of *The Toys* (1952), with its dumbly staring eye, is almost lovable. If Baziotes's forms don't have Miró's sense of play, they do have something of the Catalan's caprice, manifested here in an imperturbable whimsy: the cyclopic creature with a halo of pink light, in the upper-right-hand corner of *The Flesh Eaters*, enters the painting like someone crashing a party. It's not every Abstract Expressionist that has a sense of humor.

For the most part, Baziotes's paintings are the sum of their parts. His figures rarely communicate with one another or with the painting's support. There's an arbitrariness to the work. One's eye tends to bounce from form to form trying to deduce some overriding nexus that isn't forthcoming; the paintings never click. This sense of distraction may have been intentional—it does give Baziotes's imagery its dream-like quality—but it doesn't make for *whole* paintings. Baziotes may have realized this. In both *The Toys* and *Untitled* (1962), he divides the painting's field with a horizon line, creating a unified stage for his actors to dwell in. But the literalness of this device is clunky.

Nevertheless, Baziotes's environments are felt by insinuation, so that while his forms have little in common, they do connect, individually, with the spaces they inhabit. This is achieved primarily through contour, where the negative space of the painting subtly turns in on form, "biting" it into definition: the worm-like creature that dominates *Untitled*, for instance, is a study in the sinuousness of line. And it is this "bite" that makes the paintings cohere as repositories of imagery, if not as complete compositions.

Ultimately, it is Baziotes's gift for shape and color that make us take in the paintings.

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The scumbled layers of closely valued color bring to mind the work of Milton Avery, Rothko, and even Bonnard. Odd and off-center, Baziotes's pinks, grays, and purples create fields of atmospheric density, nuanced and not without electricity. While the aqueous nature of his imagery would seem to lend itself ideally to watercolor, he seems to have felt more at ease with the physical medium of oil paints. (Indeed, Baziotes had little gift for watercolor; the few on view here are halting, the fluidity of the medium rendered soggy and illustrative.) Baziotes's discordant color harmonies and feathery paint handling risk an over- finessed stylishness, but here they hit the mark, imbuing his paintings with a coloristic charge that reproduction is incapable of capturing. The way in which Baziotes balances the areas of fuzzed gray, rust, and purple with the centralized linear form of *Pompeii* may qualify it as a masterpiece after all.

Was Baziotes a great painter? Probably not, but he was a good one. Blum Helman Gallery, of course, would like us to think of him as something more. As a sidebar to "32 Years Later," a vitrine holds personal objects once belonging to the artist: a photo of General Sherman by Man Ray with a definition of "true courage"; a family photo; and a pair of "good luck" shoes worn by Baziotes in the studio. This collection of artifacts, reminiscent of nothing so much as a postmodernist shrine, lets us know that we are in the presence of a significant—nay, a major—artist. (Why, his shoes are imbued with magic!) Museological puffery, however, doesn't help anyone see the work, and one can do without the business of legend-making.

Fortunately, one can summarily take in these objects and concentrate on the paintings. And they are worth the concentration. The key to Baziotes's beguiling imagery may be that it is, despite its reliance on the fantastic, down to earth. "My work," the artist wrote, "is like the Caribbean—above the Blue Sky and below the Blue Water—beneath the Sharks." This statement gives an indication that Baziotes's otherworldly images found their allusive power in the commonplace. And his best paintings—ethereal, haunting, and, yes, significant—are anything but. "32 Years Later" is one of those rare exhibitions that leave the viewer wanting more.

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Theater

Missing Mister Abbott

by Mark Steyn

George Abbott was not, in any sense, a political dramatist, but, in the mid-Fifties, he was asked to stage a rally for Adlai Stevenson—an odd choice considering it was Abbott's 1950 hit *Call Me Madam* which gave Eisenhower his campaign song, "They Like Ike." Anyway, he said yes and went down to Madison Square Garden only to find that the Democrats invariably turned up late for rehearsal, which he hated, and, worse, hadn't learned their lines. He withdrew from the rally.

It's tempting to see this as some sort of political metaphor. At any rate, it exemplifies Abbott's approach to his art: he was a practical man of the theater, open-minded about content because he understood that what counts is how efficiently you serve it. I dimly recall saying as much in these pages a few months ago; in fact, since September, I seem to have cited Abbott almost every month, which is strange when you consider the man was 107. But on Broadway these days the only people who aren't dead are incredibly old, and it seemed eerily fitting that the oldest of the lot endured even as everything around him crumbled, including the theater Broadway named in his honor, the George Abbott—now a parking lot. In 1993, while the Great White Way was celebrating its centenary, Abbott was upstate, rewriting *Damn Yankees*. "What's the new script like?" I enquired. "Hard to say," he replied, "but it's better than what most 106-year-old writers are doing."

Is anything true on Broadway anymore? Take this alleged centenary: there's a playhouse on Broadway marked on a city map of 1735; Niblo's Garden was built at Broadway and Prince Street in 1828; Lester Wallack made his Broadway debut at a Broadway theater called the Broadway Theatre in 1847. But, like a faded starlet, Broadway insists on lying about its age. Still, if we take this typical bit of trashy marketing opportunism at face value, Abbott was older than Broadway and, if only because so little else has survived, came to be seen as its embodiment: he made his acting debut at the Hudson in 1913 in a play called *The Misleading Lady*; he's still playing eighty-two seasons later a few hundred yards away in the soulless precincts of the Marriott Marquis; and his first hit as a playwright was titled, with a neatness historians can only marvel at, simply *Broadway*—a wonderful Jazz Age melodrama full of gangsters and showgirls that seems in its vernacular rowdiness the very essence of New York theater.

But sometimes the exception proves the rule. The personification of Broadway was very un-Broadway: he wasn't Jewish or homosexual or East Coast or gushily theatrical; he didn't live in the past and he didn't bullshit; he dressed formally and his nickname was an anti-nickname—Mister Abbott. Many of his protégés were variously Jewish homosexual East Coast gushy nostalgic bullshitters, but, even then, they didn't seem *that* Broadway at first glance. To pluck

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a creative team at random, Jerome Robbins, Leonard Bernstein, Betty Comden, and Adolph Green are revered today as Broadway bluechips. But, in 1944, who'd have thought that a ballet choreographer, a symphony conductor, and a couple of Greenwich Village satirists had a Main Stem musical in them? Mister Abbott did, and I don't think any other Broadway director (were there any other Broadway directors in 1944?) could have maintained the balancing act needed to pull off *On the Town*.

In our collective memory, we remember the show opening with three sailors bursting ashore and hymning the city: "New York, New York, a helluva town!"—because it *sounds* like an opening number. In fact, the evening begins on the docks, with a languorous long-lined almost-spiritual, "I Feel Like I'm Not Out of Bed Yet," which leads to the big-town valentine via some harsh, dissonant "hurry music." This is the show's way of signaling its musical vocabulary, its symphonic ambitions, its way of being honest with the audience. What's wrong with most plays and musicals can usually be traced to something in the first ten minutes, something which sends the audience's expectations off in the wrong direction and leaves them feeling short-changed when they're not fulfilled.

I cite Abbott a lot because, whenever something goes awry at Playwrights Horizons or the Paramount, some elementary piece of Abbott stage savvy pops into my head, and I mourn the lost connection between operational competence and art. For the sake of example, look at *Show Boat*. The 1927–28 Broadway season saw the first nights of 264 new plays and musicals. On one night, December 26, there were eleven openings, of which *The White Eagle* was typical: the Earl of Kerhill's brother is on the lam, holed up in the West disguised as a cowhand and romancing an Injun girl called Silverwing. But the following night *Show Boat* opened, and the night after that Edna Ferber and George Kaufman's *The Royal Family*, and a couple of weeks later Eugene O'Neill's *Strange Interlude*. *Show Boat* and *Strange Interlude* alone justify the other 262. Today, a season's worth of openings barely scrapes into double figures. But it's a delusion to think you can slice off the lower levels of the pyramid without affecting the heights the top brick can reach. Abbott worked with great artists, professional craftsmen, and inferior hacks, and he did his best by all of them.

He refined his skills on farce, on *Room Service* and *Three Men on a Horse* and *Boy Meets Girl*. Farce is the most logically demanding form of theater, the most disciplined, and Abbott applied those disciplines when he returned to melodrama, when he moved into musicals (at the age of forty-eight), and when he resumed acting for a landmark production of Thornton Wilder's *The Skin of Our Teeth* in 1956. He had no theories about theater, but, when it came to specifics, he was full of good advice: "I always find that the most successful comedy songs come from a line in the book. If you're looking for an idea for a comic song, find the line in the play that gets the biggest laugh and make it into a song. Reprise the line as a song." There's one answer to second-act problems, and when Jule Styne, Comden and Green were in Boston with *Bells Are Ringing* (1956) that advice saved the show. This is play-making on the hoof, but you can only do it if you've dissected the structures of drama. The younger generation gave it fancier names—the "integrated musical," the "concept musical"—but Abbott was the first to understand the ways in which you could bind book and score together, and the first to appreciate the need for stylistic cohesion.

The night of his death I happened to be in London at *The Three Lives of Lucie Cabrol*, a John Berger story adapted by Théâtre de Complicité. This play has had extraordinary reviews, but all I could hear, from the center of the stalls, was the deafening restlessness of an audience not getting it. As we shuffled back up the aisle, much of the conversation was preoccupied with the question of why, having chopped real logs with a real ax, the actors subsequently tossed imaginary hay

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with imaginary pitchforks. Was it deliberate? wondered one theatergoer. And, if so, what was its significance? Or perhaps they couldn't afford pitchforks? Which is odd, because they could afford the ax and logs and trickling water and a lot of empty boots. So maybe it was just carelessness? (One of the many things that we last habitués of legit are supposed to make allowance for.) Either way, the effect was the same: the lack of consistency in staging language distanced us from the drama. If you're wondering about the boots, well, that was the opening: the lights go down, and we see the stage strewn with pairs of empty boots, and we think, "Ah, empty boots" and flip mentally through the International Harmonization Directive on Dramatic Symbolism until we come to Footwear, Unoccupied: "Of course! Death!" And sure enough the play opens with a little speech on death.

As Abbott was wont to say, "Cut the kindergarten stuff." Symbols are something the audience should be left to come across: the empty boots business might conceivably be fresh halfway through a play set in a boot factory whose workers have been conscripted—but only if we're allowed to find it for ourselves. A play which opens with the image is telegraphing the audience that it's so complacent in its self-importance that it's going to labor the obvious remorselessly. Having figured that boots equals death, my mind wandered to Abbott's opening for *The Pajama Game* (1954):

> This is a very serious drama. It's kind of a problem play. It's about Capital and Labor. I wouldn't bother to make such a point of all this except later on if you happen to see a lot of naked women being chased through the woods, I don't want you to get the wrong impression. This play is full of *symbolism*.

In a few lines, Abbott has distilled the show's spirit. If you don't care for it, fine, leave now; but at least, forty minutes into Act I, you can't complain you've been misled. The day before he died, Mister Abbott was working on a new production of *Pajama Game* and dictating rewrites—but not of the opening speech.

The three most successful directors of the post-Abbott generation—Jerome Robbins, Hal Prince, Bob Fosse—all worked on *Pajama Game* in one capacity or another, and all learned from him. "More directors, writers, composers, lyricists and performers have come out of the Abbott atelier than from any other single figure in the history of the American theater," says Prince, who came to work for Abbott half a century ago and, in the 1995 White Pages, is still listed as sharing an office in Rockefeller Center with him. "It's not because he's lived to 106, but because he's so secure about himself that he's not begrudging in his generosity and encouragement." He served as "apprentices' sorcerer" to talents as disparate as George Balanchine, to whom in 1936 he permitted the then unheard-of billing "Choreography by . . ."; and Nora Ephron, whose letters home from college he turned into a hit play in 1963; and Styne and Bernstein, Comden and Green, Robbins and Fosse and Prince, Frank Loesser and Garson Kanin, Gwen Verdon and John O'Hara, Gene Kelly and Stanley Donen, Sammy Cahn and Morton Gould, Carol Burnett and Natalia Makarova, Shirley MacLaine and Liza Minnelli, Adler and Ross, Bock and Harnick, Kander and Ebb; and Stephen Sondheim's first show as composer . . . Abbott's family tree extends through his own work to *Born Yesterday* and *Guys and Dolls* and *Fiddler on the Roof* and *Evita* and *Sweeney Todd*. Nine decades after Mister Abbott had his first play produced, it's difficult to find a Broadway musical which hasn't been written or staged by an Abbott graduate—hit or flop, *Phantom* or *Cyrano*, *Kiss of the Spider Woman* or *The Red Shoes*, *Passion* or *The Will Rogers Follies*.

But just as representative of "the Abbott touch" is Clifford Goldsmith. Who? Clifford Goldsmith, b. 1900, Aurora, N.Y., d. 1971, high-school nutritionist. Goldsmith had one good idea for a get-me-to-the-junior-prom farce, he wrote it up, Abbott fixed it, produced it, and staged it, and *What a Life*

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became one of the most successful plays of the day, and then a long-running radio series. Goldsmith never had another hit; presumably he went back to the high-school nutrition business, whatever that is. But, like Philip Dunning (*Broadway*), Maurine Dallas Watkins (*Chicago*), Ann Preston Bridgers (*Coquette*), and a dozen other one-hit footnotes to theatrical history, he had his moment—thanks to Abbott.

He respected hits, and had little time for the notion of the "undeserved flop." Once, I mentioned to him how much I'd enjoyed his unsuccessful update of the Frankenstein story, which he co-wrote and directed off-Broadway at the age of 102. "That's what I call wasted time," he snapped, and returned to what he considered more fruitful areas of conversation. At 102, a guy can't afford wasted time—especially in an arena where they now figure the average musical takes eight years from page to stage. Abbott's successors transformed popular theater into art—and forgot to take the audience with them: the heirs to Abbott and Rodgers gathered all their expertise, all their technique, and lavished it on *Passion* and *The Petrified Prince*. The theater needs hits: it was because Abbott had given Prince three in a row that the young producer could afford to take a chance on *West Side Story*; Abbott's production of *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum* gave Sondheim the financial cushion to indulge himself with *Pacific Overtures* and *Assassins*. Hardcore Sondheim groupies tend to look on *Forum* (1963) as an aberration: good grief, it ran three years and made piles of money; best not to mention it. For them, the real Sondheim was born the following year. *Anyone Can Whistle* was his first cult flop—nine performances and out—and inaugurated the composer as we know him today, a genius too special for the expense account set, the bridge & tunnelers and all the other dummies who'd rather be vegged out at *Hello, Dolly!* But Sondheim himself in his more generous moments points out that *Forum* is, if you give it a moment's thought, one of his most formally experimental works. For one thing, it's the only musical farce that's ever worked. It's difficult to musicalize, say, Feydeau because there's too much plot to fit any songs in, and, if you try to use songs in the traditional Rodgers-and-Hammerstein sense, it all gets too relentless. *Forum* uses the songs as a respite: instead of, as in a musical play, advancing the situation or illuminating character, they bring the play juddering to a halt; they're a chance to stand still and catch your breath. Only Abbott could have taken a one-set no-romance anti-musical and made it seem such an obvious, natural hit.

You find this throughout his career. He delivered hits, but *On Your Toes* (1936), only his second musical, was the first Broadway show with a dramatically integrated ballet; *The Boys from Syracuse* (1938) was the first Shakespearean musical; *Pal Joey* (1940) was the first with an anti-hero; *On the Town* (1944) was the first with a symphonic score; *Look, Ma, I'm Dancin'* (1948) was the first dance musical; even *Wonderful Town* (1953) has a musicalized dinner-party scene far more radical than anything Bernstein wrote when he moved into opera proper with works like *A Quiet Place* . . . Abbott never indulged innovation; it's not its own justification. But would Rodgers have gone on to do *Oklahoma!* and *Carousel* if Abbott hadn't shown him, in their five shows together, that musicals could have their own dramatic integrity?

At a 100th-birthday seminar, an earnest drama student asked him, "Mister Abbott, when did the theater first become tainted by commercialism?" "Sixteen hundred one," he replied, "when Shakespeare said to Burbage, 'Now let's get this show to a bigger theater.'" Abbott was as confident cutting Shakespeare as Comden and Green, and here *is* a funny thing: as the years go by, *Kiss Me, Kate* and *West Side Story* seem more and more products of their era, and no great threat to the originals; but, in transforming *The Comedy of Errors* into *The Boys from Syracuse*, Abbott streamlined the structure, loosened up

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the comedy, and ended up improving on Shakespeare. Ever since, the most successful versions of *The Comedy* have always given the impression that they'd much rather be doing the musical; Shakespeare directors have devoted most of their energies to finding substitutes for Rodgers and Hart, drafting in everyone from Sir Arthur Sullivan (London, 1952) to the calypso balladeer Cy Young (Bristol, 1960); the best production of recent years—Trevor Nunn's for the RSC—threw in the towel and decided what the hell, let's do a musical.

A couple of seasons ago, Dame Judi Dench staged *The Boys from Syracuse* at the Open Air Theatre in Regent's Park and this is what she did: as the three ladies are doing "Sing for Your Supper," she brought on a man dressed as a giant chicken; unable to stage the song, she decided instead that the song needed help. The trouble with the contemporary theater is that its stagers are all giant chickens: rather than convince you of the material, they panic, and distract you from the material with irrelevant flim-flam. Abbott never did. In New Haven with *Call Me Madam*, he suggested that Irving Berlin write another contrapuntal number, like one he remembered from forty years earlier, "Play a Simple Melody." Berlin came back with "(You're Not Sick) You're Just in Love." Abbott and Robbins were so confident of the song that they told Berlin it would be sung unstaged: no lights, no dancing, nothing to get in the way. It stopped the show. Conversely, struggling with a campy romp called *Out of This World*, he junked Cole Porter's "From This Moment On." Last year, I asked him how he could possibly have done such a thing. "I'd do it again tomorrow," he growled. "It slowed the show." He was the first director to bring dramatic considerations to musical structure: it had to be the right song in the right place.

It made a difference that he was a writer/director in a writer's theater. Before Abbott, directors were traffic cops: they looked after the star and moved people on and off. Today directors are the only stars left: the '94 *Show Boat* stars Hal Prince; in 1927, who knew or cared who directed it? (Zeke Colvan.) Abbott was amused by the trend: when Robbins, on *West Side Story*, introduced the now standard billing of "Entire Production Conceived, Choreographed And Directed By . . ." —and in a box, too—Abbott commented: "That's like saying 'Entire Part Of Mother Played By Lizzie Flop.'" He knew that, in a theater where the directors are the stars, you soon run out of anything to direct. At the Public Theatre, Prince has devoted a year of work, almost thirty actors, and three-quarters of a million dollars to *The Petrified Prince* and run up against the limits of his power. In the end, the property matters: there *is* a difference between Kern and Hammerstein or Sondheim, on the one hand, and Michael John LaChiusa, on the other, and the slickest stager in the world can't hide it. "Feel/ If you can feel/ Then you can speak/ Shout/ Rise . . ." just isn't worth Prince's trouble.

Fashions change, but, years after they went their separate ways, Prince respected Abbott enough to always arrange a private full-dress performance of his shows before his mentor. So Abbott would sit fifth-row center, and the cast would play *Cabaret*—in three acts. "Put it in two acts," said the old play doctor afterward. Prince did, and you marvel today at how, structurally, it could ever have been otherwise: the first-act finale, where the waiters sing their sweetly beguiling "Tomorrow Belongs to Me" and then you see for the first time their swastikas, seems so obviously the first-act finale you can't believe it took Abbott to point it out. "He doesn't think in terms of what is now called the concept," Prince told me, "but he thinks about the arc. He knows the trajectory of a show, which is why he's had so few disasters in a lifetime in the theater. He was the master of American farce comedy but there is never a dishonest moment on the stage. Characters are always consistent with their character. He never slams a door for the sake of slamming a door, he slams it for a reason. His shows are honest, peppy, energetic—*really* energetic, and that's another thing I learned from him. There's so much phony energy in

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the theater: people think that by running around in circles like a crazed tiger, you're displaying energy, and, in fact, you're not. You can have energy in the stillest place in the world, and he knew that." Even as he organized and disciplined comedy and musicals, Abbott never confused tempo with speed. We bury him at a time when that mistake has become routine. Jerry Zaks's heartless burlesques of *Guys and Dolls* and *Anything Goes* are full of "phony energy," and, even as the director's heaped with honors, you wonder: if these weren't revivals, if we didn't already love them, would Zaks's stagings persuade us of their merits?

From its concoction of fake centenaries to its obsession with revivals, we know that Broadway wishes it could turn the clock back. But all it can do is fake it. Abbott took the most stylized and artificial forms of theater—farce and musicals—and filled them with recognizable Americans in street clothes. Perhaps it's more difficult than it sounds, at least to judge by the grim cartoons of Zaks & Co. Or perhaps all the "lively arts" eventually devour themselves: like pop music and TV, Broadway has acquired too much of a back-catalogue to be anything other than self-referential and postmodern. Abbott liked to quote the one about holding a mirror up to life; today, shows are about shows, not life. He grew up in Wyoming; he worked as a cowboy, and one of his early acting roles was as a cowboy; to Hal Prince and others, he looked like Gary Cooper. Certainly, he shared both Cooper's famous economy of language and his integrity. It was fascinating to watch him in San Diego, in the theater night after night, those bright piercing eyes fixing the stage, anxious to whip *Damn Yankees* into shape for Broadway. At dinner before the opening, he filled the glass of his friend, the dancer Natalia Makarova. "How's the wine?" he asked. "So-so," she said. A few moments later, she enquired how the show was. "Same as the wine," he said. Abbott's was an American life, and a life in the theater: from ranches and brothels to Tonys and Pulitzers. And, to the end, the old play doctor was still trying to work out how to fix the play. Would that we could.

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The media

A conservative conspiracy?

by James Bowman

When I saw the cover story on right-wing chic among the young in *The New York Times Magazine* of February 12, I was reminded of Philip Larkin's famous lament about having been "just too late" to have caught the beginning of "sexual intercourse" in 1963:

> Cool conservatives began
> In nineteen ninety-three
> (Which was rather late for me)
> Between the Hillary health-care plan
> And the Newt-led G.O.P.

James Atlas, the author of the piece and coiner of the term "counter-counterculture," actually interviewed me for it, but, unlike our dashing managing editor, I was not young or beautiful enough to have made the final cut. He did not even ask me if I was a fan of Smashing Pumpkins or 10,000 Maniacs (it would have done no good to lie, I suppose), and my ostentatious smoking of unfiltered Camels turns out to have been pretty routine behavior on the right these days. Moreover, he could probably tell at a glance that, even in a picture gallery where Bill Kristol is made to look like Mussolini and Richard Brookhiser like Savonarola, my own forbidding exterior would have brought into question the idea of even the fleetingly charming fascist.

For the overexposure of Joseph Pluchino's photographs, which washes out the features not only of Kristol and Brookhiser but of all his subjects, is not to discredit them, I think, but to make them look chic to New Yorkers, who may never have seen a conservative before. Like biker leather gear, say, or the ghetto-style haircuts which are the subject of the piece that follows Mr. Atlas's, this photographic legerdemain is a way to make people look at once forbidding and attractive. If they weren't at least a little bit sexy, they would not be in *The New York Times Magazine*. That much we know. It is less Atlas's attempt to trivialize the Right which makes his piece so—well—trivial than it is the structural principle of the magazine itself. Nothing ever appears in it which is *not* trivial. And if it wasn't trivial before, it will become trivial simply by appearing there.

So if you think that you are a fine fellow (or, of course, gal) and rather a considerable intellect or spirit or talent, a person of gravitas, all that is required to disabuse you of the notion is that *The New York Times Magazine* should do a feature on you. Yet I confess myself disappointed to have been left out. Perhaps I secretly believe I am in need of the sort of mortification of the ego that I assume would be the consequence of my appearance among my not-quite coevals of the Movement. Or perhaps I just long to be one of the pod people who can move at ease among humankind, as Lisa Schiffren says:

> We went to the same schools, live in the same places, wear the same clothes [as liberals]. But to the left, it's as if we're from the twilight

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> zone. People don't see the difference between me and Phyllis Schlafly. They believe that anyone who's pro-life must be rigid, repressed and neurotic about the sex they're probably not getting.

Of course it is Atlas's task delicately to strip away the camouflage from these seeming belongers and show that, in fact, they *are* from the twilight zone—or at least from the far-right fringe, which comes to the same thing. After having interviewed a number of them at the home of David Brock, he notes that

> there is another youngish conservative faction that wasn't represented at Brock's place that night—one that also claims to speak for the majority of Americans, but not from Manhattan or Georgetown. These other young conservatives did not attend Ivy League schools, but do worry about school texts that consider Darwin's theory of evolution scientific. These conservatives are not up on popular culture; they think it's evil. They wouldn't feel comfortable at a party like Brock's—wouldn't like the smoking and drinking, the soundtrack from "Pulp Fiction." And it is probably fair to say that they would not feel comfortable in a room with so many professional women, with so many Jews, or with Brock himself, who is openly gay.

The argument here is that if they share any beliefs with the Religious Right they must share all beliefs with the Religious Right. And, once this logic is accepted, they must also accept that they are anti-Semitic Jews, anti-gay homosexuals, anti-women women—in short, monsters of nature. Or nature as viewed through a lens even more distorting than Mr. Pluchino's.

Why go to the trouble? Why certify cool conservatives as sexy by putting them into the magazine and then devote so much ratiocination to proving that they are really no better than a bunch of redneck bigots? I think because it is a stage of denial. It is a way for the media Left to reassure itself that the rest of the world which is rallying to the Right is simply deceived, while at the same time accounting in their own minds for the deception. Consider what else was to be found in *The New York Times* on the same day as Atlas's piece ran:

- An article by Richard L. Berke on the Republican hero, Governor John Engler of Michigan, raising questions about his supposed success in cutting taxes and reforming welfare in Michigan: "Despite the high praise, many critics assert that Mr. Engler's successes are built on a precarious foundation," he writes. And, more baldly: "Still, the Michigan success story is not as overwhelming as the governor might have audiences believe."

- An article by Philip J. Hilts suggesting that conservative opposition to the Food and Drug Administration's extreme caution in approving new drugs for the market was likely to result in catastrophe. Republican proposals for reform were "throwing the baby out with the bathwater" and "could set public health back into the dark ages" in the view of two of their critics (no one was quoted in favor of the changes) and were tainted at the source by having been proposed by right-wing foundations or those with ties to the pharmaceutical industry. Mr. Gingrich, in particular, "has been an outspoken critic of the F.D.A. He has also received campaign donations from industry donors interested in streamlining the agency's process."

- An article by David W. Dunlap on anxieties among gays and lesbians because of "the shadow cast by a hostile Congress and a diffident White House" on their campaign for "protection, recognition and support." Representative Gerry Studds warned of "an unprecedentedly heavy barrage" unless "the decent men and women in the

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majority party will be able to stand up to it and have the courage of their convictions. If they don't it's going to be a God-awful time here."

- An article by David Lawsky purporting to show that Alexander Hamilton, John Jay, and James Madison, the authors of *The Federalist Papers*, would not have approved of the Republican balanced-budget amendment (on the grounds, among others, that Hamilton's concern to protect the federal government's ability to pay its debts was the same thing as a putative concern to protect its ability to contract new ones)—and that Jefferson was a Democrat to boot!

- A full-page investigative piece by Jeff Gerth and Stephen Labaton which attempted to establish a discreditable if not corrupt connection between Speaker Gingrich and a large producer of copper wire, the Southwire Company of Carrollton, Georgia, which has been a big supporter and contributor of his. Although the authors acknowledge that "no evidence has emerged that Mr. Gingrich improperly intervened in any matters against Southwire," the investigation should be of interest because (1) Southwire is a known polluter and (2) Gingrich, presumably under its influence and that of its owners, the Richards family, changed from being an environmentalist to being pro-business. "Newt did a flip-flop vis-à-vis his support of business, of industry in general, and Southwire was his talisman," in the words of one critic.

If ever there were any doubt that the entire culture of *The New York Times* is arranged according to a leftish political orientation, the edition of February 12 should put it to rest. This culture takes its lead from the likes of Mr. Michael Lind, whose ideas, both acknowledged and unacknowledged, inform Mr. Atlas's final take on the Right. He quotes approvingly Lind's neck-snapping judgment on the Cool Conservatives that they "don't know and they don't want to know—the world beyond the Hudson River is a complete mystery to them." That's turning the tables for you! Of course the rather interesting subtext to this statement is that, to Lind, "the world beyond the Hudson River" is a truly nasty place, full of bigots and homophobes and Christians whose acquaintance, should the minicons ever be unfortunate enough to make it, would shock them. Such is the condition of democracy on the left.

Similar assumptions may be detected in Lind's own piece in the Winter number of *Dissent*, entitled "Why Intellectual Conservatism Died." Once again, he means to shock, and begins by saying:

> The collapse of intellectual conservatism in America has been as complete as it has been swift. Consider a few contrasts. In 1984, the leading conservative spokesman in the media was George Will; by 1994, it was Rush Limbaugh.

Not only is this the first we have heard of this "collapse," it is the first we have heard that there was anyone, appointed or elected, who held the official post of "leading conservative spokesman." One thinks of the vulgar satisfaction of the "lady" in Westminster Abbey in John Betjeman's poem—she who prays that God "Put beneath Thy special care/ One eighty nine Cadogan Square"—that her prayers are being uttered "Where the bones of leading statesmen/ Have so often been interred." And no sooner do we discover that there is a "leading spokesman" than we learn that the respectable incumbent of that office has been deposed by a supposedly ignorant brute with roughly seven years less formal education than he has.

It is thus a relief to reflect that, after all, Mr. Will's bones are not rotting in an unmarked grave in Ekaterinburg and that he continues to speak and to write and to lead conservative thinking—often including Rush Limbaugh's. Mr. Lind's affecting to see him as the victim of some sort of regicide is per-

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haps simply by way of explanation for his dislike of Mr. Limbaugh, to whose radio and television broadcasts he has almost certainly listened, if at all, very little. But Limbaugh's name has become a kind of shorthand on the left and in particular with Lind for all that they fear in resurgent conservatism. In Atlas's piece, he is quoted as saying that the battle on the right is between "Limbaugh meanness and Tory civility."

What Lind *really* fears is not Limbaugh (than whom it would be difficult to find many people on the radio more civil) but "the Religious Right." Back in the 1960s and 70s, he thinks, sophisticates like Bill Buckley and Irving Kristol were decent fellows, but they are now in their dotage and have been rudely thrust aside as "leading conservatives" by vulgarians from places south of Washington who go to Protestant churches, disapprove of homosexual behavior, and are said by people Mr. Lind trusts to disapprove of blacks and Jews as well. Here is his version of conservative intellectual history:

> For several decades, the chiefly Protestant and heavily southern and western mass constituency of conservatism had, as its spokesmen, Catholic and Jewish intellectuals, most of them Ivy League–educated Northeasterners. This was no accident, as the Marxists say; the success of Buckley and his allies in discrediting the John Birch Society in the early 1960s effectively wiped out the major rival for the leadership of conservative white Protestant Americans. Though the Birchers probably reflected the views of the conservative base more faithfully than people like Buckley or Kristol, the leaders of the Catholic right and the Jewish right became the only *respectable* spokesmen for conservatism.

"As the Marxists say" indeed! Here is a quasi-Marxian analysis of conservatism's history as mere power-struggle. Buckley purged the Birchers, but they went back to their southern fastnesses, regrouped and reappeared thirty years later as the Christian Right—which proceeded, as we might infer from Lind's dialectical analysis, quietly to arrest and execute the remaining Buckleyites in positions of power. At least the native-born ones. For, weirdly taking on the characteristics of the xenophobes and bigots whom he is in the process of finding under the Republican bed, Lind proceeds to notice a dark significance in the fact that the good old U. S. of A. is, "to my knowledge, the only democracy in which the editor of the leading conservative journal is not himself a citizen of the country."

Once again it is curious that Lind seems to see "editor of the leading conservative journal" as a quasi-official position, as it would be in a Marxist state. The interloper, poor John O'Sullivan, hasn't even the grace to be a Chicano or a Haitian or some other politically correct form of immigrant but a "loyal subject" of the monarch who is also an undisputed descendant of the tyrant who attempted to deny American patriots their freedom—and a "Thatcherite" to boot! Among the other sinister foreigners whom Lind sees as having assisted O'Sullivan in seizing control of native American conservatism are Arnaud de Borchgrave (Belgian), the Reverend Sun Myung Moon (Korean), Rupert Murdoch (Australian), Conrad Black (Canadian), and Arianna Stassinopoulos Huffington, whom he insults even more concentratedly and more gratuitously than he does John O'Sullivan by calling her a "Greco-British-American trophy wife."

Hold on a second, there, Michael. A "trophy wife" is an empty-headed bimbo whom a rich and powerful husband parades as a sign of his wealth and power before the world. However she may be disliked by some, Mrs. Huffington has never before been accused of possessing as her chief assets only those of a Playboy bunny. If anything, it is her rich and powerful husband who is accused of being the dummy—the trophy husband, as it were, for a clever but charming woman attracted to the things that money can buy. But there is hardly a single prominent conservative younger than sixty who escapes a similarly gratuitous bashing. R. Emmett Tyrrell is accused of engaging in "sensational and lucrative tabloid jour-

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nalism," for example, while William Bennett and William Kristol are said to be nothing but "middlemen between the uncouth fire-and-brimstone Protestant evangelicals and the world of serious journalism, policy, and scholarship"—mere "image consultants for Protestant fundamentalists."

Surely this is a bit over-the-top even for an article which is obviously meant to outrage. Like Mrs. Huffington, Messrs. Tyrrell, Kristol, and Bennett may be many things, but it is beyond all credulity to call them sensationalists, fools, or dupes. Such charges partake of the generally Marxist quality of the analysis, which emerges with especial clarity when Lind reveals the nature of his beef with the Religious Right. After damning with faint praise the older, more sophisticated conservatives like Midge Decter and William F. Buckley for taking on what he takes for granted as the anti-Semitism of Russell Kirk and Pat Buchanan, Lind condemns them for not extending their censure to the hated Protestant Christians:

> The "paleoconservatives" of *Chronicles* broke off and formed their own far-right organization, the John Randolph Society. Neocons railed against the conservatism of "the fever swamps." Only a few years later, however, the fusionists and neocons had themselves adopted "fever swamp" themes, like the so-called "culture war" and the claim that homosexuals are trying to destroy family, religion, and Western civilization. After Bush lost in 1992, the center-right quickly became indistinguishable from the far right.

If the neocons were insufficiently alert to the dangers of the so-called fever swamps, then what was it which caused the paleoconservatives associated with *Chronicles* to break off with them and form "their own far-right organization"? And, after they did, what was the nature of the pressure on them to return to the "fever swamp" themes themselves? None of this makes any sense until we learn that what he thinks is going on down in the fever swamp is "the so-called 'culture war' and the claim that homosexuals are trying to destroy family, religion, and Western civilization."

By yoking these two things together, Lind means to imply that "the so-called culture war" is tantamount to the claim (made by whom? does anyone make this claim besides those who deprecate it?) that homosexuals are trying to destroy Western civilization. Therefore, anyone who believes even that the so-called culture war exists has in effect made the same claim about homosexuality. This is patent nonsense. Lots of people take the "culture war" very seriously—some homosexuals among them—who would not dream of making such a wild charge as that homosexuals want to destroy Western civilization. That Mr. Lind would have us believe that the two things are equivalent is an obvious piece of intellectual dishonesty which is, once again, reminiscent of Marxian techniques. His constant complaints against conservatives for adopting a policy of "no enemy to the right" is in fact a sheer fabrication. He is playing the old Comintern game of identifying everyone to the right of himself with the extreme right wing, only without using the word "fascist."

Having thus denied the intellectual legitimacy, as well as the right to be heard, of (so far as we can see) all the conservative epigoni, he proceeds to a further series of outrageous calumnies. Why is there no conservative intellectual worth taking seriously? Because the former generation of intellectuals, the Podhoretzes and the Kristols and the Buckleys, all practiced nepotism and hired their untalented offspring to carry on thinking for them. Why did conservatives adopt a set of policy prescriptions which the comprehensive intelligence of Mr. Lind seems to regard as self-evidently absurd—for example, tax cuts and laws against abortion? Since it is inconceivable to Lind that such views could be held in good faith, it must be that their holders are simply sucking up to the rich, whose copious dollars corrupted them and made them abandon critical thinking.

Thus too he cites the example of *Chron-*

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icles to show how conservatives are kept in their Neanderthal state by lust for right-wing foundation money without noting that the *Chronicles* people fell foul of the foundations not by becoming too liberal but by becoming too conservative. Such distinctions mean nothing to Lind, however, who sees the generic product he calls "American conservatism" as

> defined by the fundamentalist/tabloid right, with its program of making centrist and liberal Christians, Jews, and secular Americans, working women, nonwhite Americans, gay men and lesbians, and intellectuals scapegoats for the serious problems afflicting American society (problems for which the conservatives I have worked with for a decade have no plausible answers) . . . The Radical Right has no arguments, only hatreds.

Talk about hatreds! When it comes to hatred, the far right has nothing more to teach Michael Lind, who has perhaps learned from it the technique of guilt by association:

> By the mid-eighties, conservatives were dismissing very serious objections to the practicability of space-based strategic defenses as "liberal" propaganda (as though there were "liberal" physics and "conservative" physics)... In the once-moderate *Public Interest*, editor Irving Kristol published a rave review of a book by Richard Epstein, a legal theorist who argues that most federal laws against racial discrimination are unconstitutional—a view formerly associated with the John Birch Society rather than the neocons.

Mr. Lind may attack with vigor yet another of his straw men, the idea that there is "'liberal' physics and 'conservative' physics" (who but his imaginary right-wing kook would ever believe that there is?), but he himself clearly believes that there is liberal and conservative constitutionalism. The fact that the John Birch Society believes that anti-discrimination laws are unconstitutional means that, *ipso facto*, they must be constitutional, since Birchite constitutionalism is wrong by definition to liberal constitutionalists.

This is what we might call the "Nazis wore underwear" argument: not only underwear but breakfast and Wagner, shirt buttons and Nietzsche, pencils and vegetarianism, beer and socialism—all can be positively linked to Nazism. Does that make all these things Nazi? Only in the perfervid imagination of such conspiracy theorists as Mr. Lind himself seems to be aspiring to emulate both here and in an even more remarkable piece entitled "Rev. Robertson's Grand International Conspiracy Theory," published in *The New York Review of Books* of February 2. It would actually be more appropriate to call this article "Michael Lind's Grand International Conspiracy Theory," for its attempt to associate Pat Robertson, the lightweight theorizer and evangelist, with a cabal of right-wing crazies and anti-Semites itself makes use of exactly the techniques usually associated with such people.

Imagine an essay purporting to show that Lind was a Communist by quoting from his writings and comparing them with passages taken at random from the writings of Marx or Lenin or Trotsky. I daresay that it would not take a lot of ingenuity to prove Bill Buckley or Ronald Reagan a Communist by such means, let alone Michael Lind. But no writer could gain a hearing for the exercise in a respectable intellectual journal. Yet Lind's attack on Robertson does exactly that by taking parallel passages from the Canadian Nazi apologist William Guy Carr and Robertson in order to establish that the two think alike. He acknowledges that, unlike "much earlier far-right literature," Robertson's book, *The New World Order*, does not apologize for Nazis. But the sort of disreputable thinking which does "shares many of Robertson's theories of historical causation."

Also, presumably, some of the same nouns, adjectives, and prepositions. When Robertson's strictures against international bankers include the use of the word "ten-

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tacles," Lind helpfully comments: "Note the 'octopus' metaphor, a staple of anti-Semitic and anti-capitalist rhetoric." When Robertson identifies a founder of a German secret society as "a German radical," Lind appends: "Note Robertson's use here, as in his descriptions of other Jews later, of the adjective 'German' rather than 'Jewish.'" But isn't that good? No! "since the adjective 'German' or 'European' frequently refers to Jews in the American literature of anti-Semitism." Such are the little-known facts whose faint redolence may be picked up by the sniffers-out of conspiracy. Although he acknowledges that Robertson explicitly disavows anti-Semitism, Lind's quest for his true and hidden meanings, undertaken with an anti-Bilderburger's combination of enthusiasm and ingenuity, continually turns up instances of words, phrases, or ideas which have at some time or another been used by anti-Semites.

Thus, Robertson "comes close to endorsing" an anti-Semitic slander by condemning war-profiteers. Why? Because someone somewhere (both unspecified) has said that Jews incite wars in order to profit from them. Or, when Robertson claims that the CIA's overestimates of Soviet economic strength could have been the result either of the CIA's own duplicity in the cause of perpetuating the Cold War or of Soviet disinformation, Lind says that Robertson "protects himself" by calling the latter the more likely reason. Protects himself from what? Why, from the obvious implication of anti-Semitism in blaming the CIA, since that would be to link the Agency to the Council on Foreign Relations and thus to international bankers, many of whom are Jewish! Well, we may think, maybe not *very* close to endorsing!

It is this which is the infallible mark of the conspiracy theorist: Just as Robertson's *not* calling someone a Jew is to Lind as damning as calling him one, so the fact that he *does not* believe some of the things that the crazies believe is as damning as the fact that he does believe some. That he discusses "at length" the idea of CIA deception before rejecting it not only means that he really believes it but that his belief entails a whole crazy right-wing, anti-Semitic complex of other beliefs—beliefs which, perhaps as a result of some kind of intellectual Stockholm syndrome, Lind seems to enjoy formulating on his victim's behalf. He writes:

> Why would the secret cabal that runs the U.S. through the Council on Foreign Relations want to keep up "Cold War levels of wasteful spending"? The argument of the book makes the answer clear: Compound interest, the Baron Rothschild's "eighth wonder of the world." By pretending that the Soviet Union was much more powerful than it was, the American establishment, controlled by *Hochfinanz*, could justify borrowing money from international financiers, and repaying them with tax dollars from working Americans.

That's what Michael Lind's fevered brain regards as "clear"! That some unspecified Baron Rothschild once called compound interest "the eighth wonder of the world" appears, perhaps, weirdly significant to Robertson but much more weirdly so to Lind, since the former's recording the maxim in cold print is to him virtually tantamount to profession of belief in the Protocols of the Elders of Zion. And the fact that Robertson goes out of his way to disavow anti-Semitism is to Lind yet more evidence that he is an anti-Semite.

In the same way, he finds it deeply significant that Robertson is even prepared to entertain the notion that more than just opposition to Communism was involved in America's fighting of the Cold War or that the Gulf War was partly the result of manipulation by "powerful people" to bring about precisely the Bush administration's commitment to that sinister-sounding New World Order. "Robertson's conservative allies," he writes, "might be surprised to learn that the leader of the Christian Coalition believes that the cold war may have been a hoax designed to funnel money from taxpayers to High Finance through the defi-

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cit," and that "the Bush administration deliberately pushed Saddam into an unnecessary war in order to promote globalism and thus serve the interests of the masters of the U.S. government, the international money men and their own masters, the Illuminati, the 'powerful people' to whom he refers."

Maybe so, indeed, but are not Lind's liberal allies at *The New York Review of Books* surprised to learn that the opionions he considers to be evidence of right-wing craziness and anti-Semitism are opinions more usually associated with—*The New York Review of Books*? In fact, Noam Chomsky has just produced a book on the same subject, called *World Orders Old and New*, in which he arrives at conclusions remarkably similar to Pat Robertson's about the responsibility borne by international capitalism for wars and human misery. How can Chomsky, a *New York Review* contributor from of old, escape the stigma of craziness associated with Robertson?

The answer is that it is not the views themselves but their (fundamentalist) Christian provenance which is offensive to Lind, who appears to consider opposition to *Roe v. Wade* as itself *prima facie* evidence of craziness and that the United States "beyond the Hudson River" is poised on the brink of fascism:

> Much has been written in the American press about neo-fascist movements in Italy, Germany, Japan, and France. But the United States is the only industrial democracy in which a far-right political leader in one of only two major parties has created a base of support so powerful that conventional politicians and intellectuals in his party feel they must defend him from charges of anti-Semitism.

And, he might have added, the only industrial democracy in which respectable journals of opinion would have been silly enough to air such charges in the first place.

Lind's strident attacks on the conservatives who once employed and befriended him, as well as on such weaker members of the conservative intellectual herd as Pat Robertson, represent the latest attempt by the Left to further its long-term project of marginalizing and denying respectability to the Right. His hysterical announcement, just as conservatives have risen to predominance in the houses of Congress, of the death of intellectual conservatism would be merely laughable if it were not for the grim determination with which this project continues to be pursued by those—at *The New York Times* no less than at *Dissent* and *The New York Review of Books*—for whom it must be one of their few remaining hopes.

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Books

When peacekeepers fail

by Arthur Waldron

An analytical distinction, first made more than two thousand years ago by Thucydides, continues to shape most intellectual consideration of war. The Peloponnesian conflict destroyed the Athens of Pericles even more completely than the First World War did Europe, and Thucydides found its cause not in the immediate train of events that led up to it—the crisis in Epidamnus, the Corinthian and Corycrean interventions, the Megarian Decree, and so forth—but in something much deeper, namely "the growth of Athenian power, which presented an object of fear to the Spartans and forced them to go to war."

Most modern historians have followed Thucydides' lead and accepted that wars have "underlying" as well as "immediate" causes, and that, of the two, the underlying causes are the more important. Greatly strengthened by the rise of sociology, this approach has contributed to the eclipse, in historical writing, of the study of diplomacy and of battles and military strategy.

An important exception to the pattern, however, is the work of Donald Kagan. His justly celebrated four-volume study of the Peloponnesian War argues that the underlying causes adduced by Thucydides were in fact not present: Athenian power was not growing during the period leading up to the war; "the imperial appetite of the Athenians was not insatiable but, under the leadership of Pericles, was satisfied fully; . . . the Spartans as a state were not so afraid of Athens as to seek war, at least until the crisis had developed very far." War between Athens and Sparta was far from inevitable; rather, "[t]here was good reason to believe that the two great hegemonal states and their alliances had come to terms and could live side by side in peace indefinitely." Where then did the Peloponnesian War come from? According to Kagan, "it was not the underlying causes but the immediate crisis" that produced it.

In his new book, *On the Origins of War*,[1] which grows from a popular course he has long taught at Yale, Kagan begins with the Peloponnesian War and then brings the same analytical approach to bear on four additional cases: the First World War, the Second Punic War, the Second World War, and the Cuban Missile Crisis. In each of these, instead of enumerating factor after factor that may have contributed to the conflict, Kagan asks simply: What would it have taken to avoid war? Failure to provide whatever that is, he argues, is the cause of the conflict.

Thus, the Peloponnesian War could have been stopped if Athens had sent a real battle fleet to support Corcyra. Such a firm action would have either deterred or defeated Corinth, and would certainly have convinced Sparta not to join in. But Athens did not want to appear provocatively warlike, and so

1 *On the Origins of War and the Preservation of Peace*, by Donald Kagan; Doubleday, 606 pages, $30.

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sent only ten ships. Likewise, if Rome had sent legions to defend Saguntum when the Carthaginians first laid siege in 218, a long and nearly fatal war could have been avoided. Turning to the modern period, if Sir Edward Grey had announced, early in the 1914 crisis, that Britain would come to the aid of France, then Germany would have changed course—as Bethmann-Hollweg sought to do after Grey finally showed his hand. Finally, if Hitler had only been challenged in the Rhineland, or another such critical turning, the most horrible war in history could have been avoided.

From these examples, Kagan draws the lesson that gives the book both its intellectual unity and its broader relevance: "Peace does not keep itself." It is possible, in Kagan's view, to identify in most historical periods a power that, perhaps uniquely, has the capacity to keep the peace. If that power fails to do what is necessary, then it is responsible for wars that result. By this argument, Athens bears the blame for the Peloponnesian War, Rome for the Second Punic War, and Britain for the First World War (and the Second). And had the Cuban Missile Crisis ignited the Third World War, then the United States (as will be seen) would have borne the blame.

This rather striking list of responsible parties should indicate that the blame Kagan is assigning has little to do with "war guilt" as thought of after Versailles; with who was the aggressor and who the victim. In every case (except perhaps the Punic war) the guilty party is also the more appealing one to anyone having civilized values: Athens is clearly preferable to Sparta, liberal Britain more attractive than Wilhelmine Germany—and almost anybody is better than Hitler.

This perverse correlation (based on a non-random set of only five examples) in turn raises the question of whether there may be something about just such attractive civilizations that in fact predisposes and inclines them to commit the sin of not stopping wars, even when they are entirely capable of doing so. Could it be that they fail precisely because of their aversion to conflict, and their consequent failure to think searchingly about war or to prepare for it realistically? Such seems to be the core of Kagan's argument.

Deterrence requires the creation of fear. States like Athens and Britain fear war, and they assume that force sufficient to deter them will likewise cause others to think twice. The result is that they tend to assess as very small the amount of military power required to stop a conflict: a few ships or a few thousand soldiers intended to "send a message"; enough nuclear weapons to destroy a few key cities. Related to this line of thinking is the conviction that to do otherwise increases the risk of conflict: if one power prepares or uses more than minimal force, then others may mistakenly conclude they in fact want war, and be driven to make war themselves. The way to avoid this trap is to limit forces even in peacetime, postpone military action in time of crisis, and then, if it becomes unavoidable, to use only the smallest practicable force.

Such an approach is called "minimal deterrence" in the language of strategy, and its acceptance is at the root of each of the failures Kagan analyzes. The reason is that belief in minimal deterrence affects not only behavior during crises but also the peacetime force structures and general diplomatic stance of a state. Here the prototypical example is Pericles' strategy for Athens, which was to ensure security by making the city invulnerable to attack, but without developing a capacity to counter-attack. The concept is appealing logically: who would want to attack a city that could not be taken? and by the same token, who would feel threatened by a state having no offensive potential? Therefore the Athenians enclosed their city and its harbor within walls that existing infantry could not breach, while securing their supply lines by means of an overwhelmingly strong navy. If attacked, the Athenians would withdraw behind their walls and wait for the enemy to go away. Ultimate decision would be not military but psychological: it would come when the enemy realized that

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no effort could ever defeat Athens and that peace was therefore the only choice.

This reasonable-sounding strategy failed in the Peloponnesian War because it did not frighten the Spartans enough. They could not imagine that the Athenians really meant it when they said they would decline battle on land, nor could they see any sign of an Athenian capacity really to hurt them. Confident that they would win in the expected land battle with the Athenians, the Spartans went to war. Deterrence failed because Athens possessed no "obvious, credible, frightening offensive threat."

In defense of Pericles, Kagan points out that Athens lacked the capacity to create a land army that could defeat Sparta while at the same time maintaining their critical command of the sea. Hence the great importance of using the fleet to deter early on. But such extenuating circumstances cannot be pleaded for Rome, which could have sent legions to Spain against Hannibal, nor for Britain or the United States.

The behavior of Britain before both the First and the Second World Wars underlines the importance, in peacetime, of correctly understanding potential threats and creating forces to deter them. The German Schlieffen Plan was designed to avoid the catastrophe of a two-front war by landing decisive blows successively against France and Russia. Victory in the West depended crucially on German forces being stronger than the French, which was nearly certain so long as Britain stayed out.

Britain, in turn, signaled that such was her intention. She prepared no army that could be deployed to the Continent, but instead, like Athens, relied on her navy alone. Kagan quotes Asquith's letter to a friend on hearing of the Austrian ultimatum to Serbia. He expected a Continental war, "a real Armageddon," but took comfort in the thought that "happily there seems . . . no reason why we should be more than spectators." Hence the catastrophe: Britain intervenes, in time to lose almost a million dead, but too late to deter Germany.

In Britain's favor, one can argue that no one on any side had imagined the war as it eventually took shape. But no such extenuation is available for Britain's failure in the Second World War. In that case a mindless and powerful pacifism among the intellectual classes, combined with pressure to cut spending and some very misguided military analyses (Kagan singles out Liddell-Hart's ideas about the British "indirect approach"), reduced forces to a level that made risking war with Hitler almost inconceivable.

Even Churchill was bent by the climate of opinion: as Chancellor of the Exchequer in Baldwin's government, he huffed, "Why should there be a war with Japan? I do not believe there is the slightest chance of it in our lifetime." The Admiralty should make plans "on the basis that no naval war against a first-class Navy is likely to take place in the next twenty years."

(Such arguments are hardy perennials. The lead editorial of the February 5 *New York Times*, on my table as I write, ridicules the Pentagon for basing plans on the "fantasy"—would that it were!—"of waging two [regional] wars at once.")

Inappropriate force structures and consequent yielding in crisis, then, are—to put Kagan's argument in the Thucydidean framework he casts off—the "immediate" cause of certain wars, but their "underlying" cause is acceptance of minimal deterrence. This is a very different sort of underlying cause, however, from what is familiar. It is not a deep and objective economic or social force, but rather almost an intangible: how we *think* about war, and our consequent behavior. Kagan draws perhaps the most impressive demonstration of its importance from the Cuban Missile Crisis.

John Kennedy "had taken a course on the origins of the First World War at Harvard just before the Second World War, when the revisionist views of Harvard's Sidney Fay were dominant in colleges across the country." Fay wrote that no one wanted the First World War, but nevertheless it broke out "[b]ecause in each country political and

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military leaders did certain things which led to mobilizations and declarations of war, or failed to do certain things which might have prevented them. In this sense, all the European countries, in a greater or lesser degree, were responsible."[2] Kennedy was impressed by the ease with which "one nation's misinterpretation of another's intention could set them sliding into war"; he was, moreover, an enthusiastic reader of Barbara Tuchman's *Guns of August*, which he recommended to his staff, while lecturing them on "the fatal miscalculation known to experts as 'accidental war.'"

Thus educated, the young president bent every effort to avoid such a disaster. He repeatedly declined to deter or challenge Moscow, and attempted instead to signal pacific intent. He abandoned the Bay of Pigs; he allowed the Berlin Wall; at Vienna he instructed Khrushchev about the risks of accidental war. But like the Athenians and the British, Kennedy was also objectively constrained by his own country's existing military strategy. Designed by Eisenhower, this rested on the implausible threat of massive nuclear war, embodied in the Single Integrated Operating Plan (SIOP). We have the familiar ingredients: a leader who declined to deter and forces not suited to the tasks at hand—another example, one might correctly think, of the peacekeeper failing to keep the peace. Yet this time there was no war.

Certainly Kennedy failed to deter. He knew about the missiles before they had arrived or been made operational, yet he said nothing when he met Gromyko on October 19. Fyodor Burlatsky later regretted this as a lost opportunity: "I am convinced that if John Kennedy said when he met Gromyko, 'We know everything about rockets in Cuba,' maybe there would be no crisis; because Khrushchev must understand he was discovered and that he would need now to negotiate about a new situation."

Nor did he take resolute action once the missiles became known. Tenuous rationalizations were invoked to postpone air strikes: Robert Kennedy argued that a sneak attack on the Cuban missiles would be a violation of American tradition and undermine "our moral position at home and around the globe." But in fact the president probably had no intention of using force at all. McNamara recalled years later, "I *knew* what I was going to do with SIOP. *None* of the options was going to be used at all." What then was the United States to do if Khrushchev did not accept Kennedy's terms? Again according to McNamara, "Turn the screw on the blockade and avoid the air attack and invasion"—but that most likely would never have gotten the missiles out.

Kennedy feared impeachment if the missiles stayed put, so to get them out he decided to trade NATO missiles in Turkey for Soviet missiles in Cuba. This was kept secret even from the Executive Committee of the National Security Council, and when the diaries of Robert Kennedy, one of those who conveyed the offer, were published, Theodore Sorenson dutifully edited out the record of it. But the Soviets accepted and the crisis ended.

Kagan points out that under the circumstances Khrushchev could have demanded a far higher price and that Kennedy would almost certainly have paid it. But Khrushchev did not press his advantage. Why? Kagan speculates that he was worried that the general situation was getting out of control. The Soviet military in Cuba had shot down an American U-2 without Kremlin permission; Castro had ordered Cuban anti-aircraft to fire on U.S. planes and was refusing Soviet demands to rescind the order. Khrushchev may have recalled how the Chinese had carried him to the brink of nuclear war over Quemoy a few years earlier, and did not want Castro to do the same. Furthermore, Khrushchev was realizing that although he might correctly have read Kennedy's weakness, he had failed to consider American *national* reaction. "A man as weak as [Khrushchev] thought Kennedy to be could not

2 *The Origins of the World War, Volume II. After Sarajevo: Immediate Causes of the War*, by Sidney Bradshaw Fay; Macmillan, 1928.

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for long prevent stronger action by stronger men." The Soviet leader was close to making the same mistake with Kennedy that Hitler had made with Chamberlain, but stepped back just in time. So we have the anomaly of the initial aggressor, the USSR, saving the peace.

Kagan writes like a true classicist, which is to say he assumes the reader is already interested in the topic and simply lays out his analysis. The five sections of this book are enormously informative—in every case the best short summary I know of the complex events treated—but their presentation is enlivened only occasionally by flashes of irony and well-chosen quotations.

The title, moreover, is misleading. This is not a full study of the "origins of war," but rather a well-documented discussion of one particularly dangerous pathway to conflict. Nor is it comprehensive. The cases are *exempla*: no attempt is made to show that they are representative, although the twentieth-century examples are so important that they must be considered significant. Kagan's assessment of what states value, and therefore what they are willing to fight over—"honor, fear, and interest"—is taken from Thucydides, and might strike a political theorist as a little bit fuzzy. But as Kagan shows, they are in fact not bad shorthand for bundles of human emotions that are easier to recognize and name than to describe in detail.

Intellectually, the book's great value is as an example of how to think analytically about war. The sufferings caused by war have led many to see it essentially as a kind of madness, a horrible unleashing of dark and irrational passions, whose essence might be captured by a Picasso but never by a rational analyst. Hence the general intellectual retreat when confronted by violence—whether into a Braudelian *longue durée* that dissolves it into gentler historical tides, or nihilistic irony, as in A. J. P. Taylor's writings, or the moralism so characteristic of more recent academic work.

But if denying its irrationality certainly misses the essence of war, so does laying too much stress on it. For war is not simply a matter of pathology or madness. Pericles, Grey, and Chamberlain were men of intelligence and even virtue. Their careers illustrate that war is also tragic, which is to say that it is a product of complex failures that mix reason and even nobility with baser things; it is something that men know and whose advent they fear, but which they often prove powerless to prevent, with the best and most thoughtful often proving the most powerless.

Ironically, this tragedy is to some extent a result of the intellectual sophistication of human civilization. Animals make snap decisions between flight and fight, and when it is the second, they make no secret of it—using all sorts of noise and display to get the message across before they actually strike. But human thought processes are more elaborate; their decisions are less crisp, and their communication is less direct. If Sir Edward Grey had been a rattlesnake, he would probably have avoided the First World War, but he was very far from it.

In this humane and penetrating study, Kagan shows how, tragically, measures undertaken precisely to prevent war have in the past repeatedly brought it closer. The suppressed passion that one senses here and there in the text seems to manifest a hope that, just possibly, if the lessons are clearly enough drawn, we may yet be able to learn from history.

The unlovable one

Selena Hastings
Evelyn Waugh: A Biography.
Houghton Mifflin, 627 pages, $40

reviewed by Brooke Allen

Is another biography of Evelyn Waugh really necessary? Only three years have passed since Martin Stannard's comprehensive, thousand-page life of Waugh was completed. Christopher Sykes's version came out in 1975; a hefty edition of Waugh's diaries

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was published a year later, horrifying large numbers of readers with the author's cupidity, drunkenness, and malevolence; a kinder and gentler Waugh was revealed in the collected letters in 1980. Waugh himself wrote the first half of an autobiography, published in 1964 under the title *A Little Learning*. Since Waugh's death in 1966 a good many of his friends and enemies have taken advantage of the ever-popular Waugh cult to write personal memoirs of the famous man.

Another biography of over six hundred pages, then, would not seem to be a strict necessity. Yet Stannard's work was a bit too voluminous, Sykes's a bit too fawning; the idea, then, of an accessible new version for the general reader is alluring, especially since this biographer is Selena Hastings, the author of a really first-rate life of Waugh's longtime friend and partner in wit, Nancy Mitford. As an added attraction, the Waugh family has allowed Hastings access to many family papers to which previous biographers were not privy. She has been able to draw extensively upon family documents, particularly the letters and diaries of Waugh's father, the publisher Arthur Waugh, and of his brother Alec, a popular novelist in his own right.

Also, in spite of all the attention given to Waugh, there have remained a number of unanswered questions about his life. His extravagant public persona is by now the stuff of legend, probably better-known than the novels themselves, and he has become a key figure in the English national mythology: his notorious rudeness continues to shock and titillate his compatriots, many of whom would like to behave the same way, as well as Americans, who get a masochistic *frisson* from being sneered at by Brits. But while he went to pains to cultivate a public persona—mad, bad, and dangerous to know in youth, in middle age "a combination of eccentric don and testy colonel"—he guarded his family's privacy, and his real feelings, fiercely. The true nature, for example, of his short first marriage to the fickle Evelyn Gardner has always been a mystery, and his second wife, Laura Herbert, was so slippery and impassive as to elude biographers and even gossipy acquaintances entirely: in spite of her being for twenty-nine years Waugh's wife, and the mother of his six children, to the outsider she remains a cipher, a gigantic blank spot at the very center of his life.

Hastings's strongest point as a biographer is that she understands her subject's sense of humor without sharing his prejudices, or his awe of the dashing and the aristocratic, and that, like Waugh himself, she has a fine nose for gossip. She doesn't scruple to give her own, biting assessments of characters usually treated with reverence. For example, she reveals Katherine Asquith, often depicted as a saint, as a humorless prude; Harold Acton, she claims, was sexually attracted to Waugh and perpetually jealous of his wives and lovers, not to mention his superior literary gifts. The beautiful Diana Cooper was possessed of "devouring vanity, richly nourished by a permanent and doting chorus of sycophantic admirers. . . . [She] was physically cold, voracious for admiration, indifferent to sexual love."

In narrating Waugh's life—the happy Hampstead childhood, the arcadian Oxford years, the frantic social life in Twenties and Thirties London, the long middle-age and decline in the West Country—Hastings is going over well-trodden ground, and she compensates, happily, by focusing on personalities rather than events, probing Waugh's more complicated relationships with considerable insight. Arthur Waugh is a case in point. Evelyn himself had given an affectionate and factually accurate account of his father in *A Little Learning*, but Hastings reveals the essential hostility into which his thin supply of filial piety had soon degenerated. A contented suburbanite, an extrovert with a taste for amateur theatricals, Arthur affected a Pickwickian pose while bearing a marked resemblance to Mr. Pooter in *Diary of a Nobody*, an affinity which is striking in his amiable, fatuous autobiography, *One Man's Road*. Arthur, Hastings writes, "had the fatal facility of the second-

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rate, a facility inherited by his elder son Alec, and regarded with contempt by his younger son Evelyn." Evelyn being Evelyn, he found it impossible to disguise his contempt. Many of his school and Oxford friends found his rudeness to his father so disturbing that they avoided visiting the Waughs.

Though Arthur's ridiculous aspects are not downplayed, Hastings's depiction of this long-suffering father is remarkably moving. Hidden behind his compulsive histrionics was a more decent and a far more intelligent man than his son cared to admit. Arthur longed to be allowed to love Evelyn and his family, but had finally to confess that they had successfully baffled his every attempt. Of Laura Waugh, he wrote in frustration: "I don't know whether she has a very strong character, & is able to keep all her feelings to herself; or whether she is a case of arrested development, soothed by Papal dope." When Evelyn and Laura's third, unwanted child died twenty-four hours after her birth, Arthur was by this time bitterly resigned to the parents' impassivity, writing, "there seems to me something quite pathetic in this little star of life, which just flickered and went out. She wasn't wanted, and she did not stay. Evelyn announced her coming as 'to the regret of all and the consternation of some.' Well, she didn't trouble them for long, and she is spared a great deal."

Like Arthur, Laura Waugh gains some dimension from Selena Hastings's treatment. If she fails yet again to come alive for the curious reader, it is due to her almost neurotic shyness and reclusiveness, and to a fear of displaying emotion, which her intolerant husband can have done nothing to ease. As one of her daughters later said, "Mummy had a very strong character, but very suppressed. Everything was very suppressed with Mummy." Laura Herbert, the third child of an ancient family recently converted to Catholicism, was brought up in the country and was exclusively interested in country pursuits; when she married the thirty-four-year-old Waugh at the age of nineteen she had virtually no experience of life outside of her own protective, eccentric family circle (the chaotic Herbert house is the model for Boot Magna in *Scoop*). Married women of her class usually had some life of their own, some circle of friends independent of their husbands, but, as Hastings writes, for Laura "there was never to be much chance of that." Evelyn's tremendous, violent, lowering personality took up most of the available oxygen, and Laura found her defense in withdrawal. She avoided Evelyn's smart London friends, refused to accompany him on his junkets to the city, and became a passionate farmer on a small scale, lavishing affection on her little herd of cows. She loved them, her son Auberon wrote, "extravagantly, as other women love their dogs or, so I have been told, their children." Though Laura certainly possessed a steely quality of self-preservation—"She could be surprisingly judgmental, and to some observers there was a quiet arrogance about her, often a slight curl to her lip"—Hastings's account gives occasional, harrowing glimpses of deep unhappiness.

Laura might have been wooed and won expressly for her utter unlikeness to Waugh's first wife, Evelyn Gardner (who, incidentally, was Laura's cousin). She-Evelyn, as everyone called her, was brutally represented by Waugh as the adulterous Brenda Last in *A Handful of Dust*, and though certainly She-Evelyn herself was by all accounts flighty and immature, it was hard not to believe that Waugh had cruelly exaggerated her shallowness in the novel. Hastings, however, leaves one not so sure. It appears that She-Evelyn had been engaged to eight different men before she finally made it to the altar with Waugh, that she married him purely to get away from her mother, that she was addicted to pleasure, hated and feared even a single evening of solitude, and possessed only the feeblest moral principles. In any case the marriage, whose breakdown was precipitated by She-Evelyn's adultery within a year of the wedding, would never have stood a chance in the face of She-Evelyn's silliness, which was outstanding even in the context of Twenties fashion: the mind boggles at the thought of the self-

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conscious, fastidious Waugh yoked in marriage to a woman who referred to Proust as "Prousty-Wousty" and declared her new father-in-law to be "a complete Pinkle-Wonk."

What does this new biography really achieve? We learn many new details, but nothing that will alter the image of Waugh already so firmly impressed upon the collective mind. The well-known portrait remains essentially the same, though Hastings paints the fine details with a skillful brush. The multitudinous warts do not diminish in number—Waugh was not a nice man, and Hastings does not pretend that he was—though the point of view is, on the whole, a sympathetic one. A good many of the fresh revelations are to do with Waugh's sex life. Two homosexual affairs at Oxford, with Richard Pares and Alastair Graham, seem to have been the most intense romantic experiences of his life, and are clearly the models for the relationship between Sebastian and Charles in *Brideshead Revisited*. It should be emphasized, though, that this narrative finally puts paid to the notion, often advanced, that Waugh was homosexual by nature and repressed his true inclinations in adulthood: the fact is that Waugh's homosexual love affairs were intense because they were adolescent; when he left Oxford and entered the larger world he transferred his attentions avidly, and permanently, to women, and could never be tempted to return to his old ways. It was Waugh's misfortune that many people found him sexually unattractive, including his first female love, Olivia Plunkett-Greene, his first wife, and the woman he ardently pursued after his divorce, Baby Jungman. Yet in other women Waugh could arouse not only passion but the most intense loyalty and friendship.

But with all the gossipy tidbits Hastings tosses in, finally somehow the book is not gossipy *enough*. Honest, well-researched, lucidly written, it nevertheless smacks of "authorized" biography, and there is an obvious hands-off principle in operation when it comes to Waugh's domestic life, perhaps in deference to the Waugh family's cooperation with the endeavor. Yet it is possible that Hastings's tact, her deadening and rather unconvincing pose of respect for Waugh, results from a subtle failure of author and subject to connect. Hastings appears to find less enjoyment in Waugh than she did in Nancy Mitford—he is to her less exhilarating, less infuriating. She feels admiration (though not much passion) for Waugh the writer, and a palpable distaste for the man himself. Understandable, of course: a lot of people felt distaste for Waugh. But a biographer, ideally, should experience some sort of intense engagement, either positive or negative, with his subject.

And Hastings's comments upon Waugh's novels betray an indifferent appreciation of his gifts. She deferentially parrots his own, so often wrong assessments of his work. "*Brideshead* is undoubtedly a great novel with a fair claim to be Waugh's finest achievement"; the *Sword of Honour* trilogy "showed him to be at the height of his powers," she writes, although those who appreciate Waugh at his most distinctive must surely acknowledge that *Brideshead* is so deeply flawed that it cannot be considered anything but a second-rate effort, and that *Sword of Honour* is fatally lacking in the rude energy, amounting almost to brutality, that was Waugh's greatest strength. And it is likely that posterity will come to judge Waugh's masterpiece to be not *Brideshead*, or even *A Handful of Dust*, powerful though it is, or the brilliant *Loved One*, but *Decline and Fall*, his first, most characteristic and vital novel.

Selena Hastings's *Evelyn Waugh* fails to give a new view of the man; fair enough, since in fact there remains probably very little to be learned on that front. But it also fails to reassess Waugh's importance as a writer, and that is a more necessary undertaking. Though Waugh is probably too offensive a figure ever to be elevated to our canon of "great" writers, there is actually a case to be made for him as such. Perhaps as the political passions of the twentieth century disappear into history the contentious

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Waugh will emerge from his setting and be seen simply as a writer, not as an invidious snob stranded in the Century of the Common Man. To the twentieth century he has appeared as a gifted oddity; out of his own time he may assume his proper level, that, one might venture, of a Jonathan Swift.

The nasty truth

Kenneth Dover
Marginal Comment: A Memoir.
Duckworth (London), 271 pages, £20

reviewed by John Gross

Sir Kenneth Dover, who was born in 1920, is one of the foremost classical scholars of his generation. He has also served as chancellor of the University of St. Andrews, president of Corpus Christi College, Oxford, and president of the British Academy. A distinguished career, though not of a kind that you would expect to stir up much excitement beyond the world of learning. And then just before Christmas he published his autobiography, under the chaste title *Marginal Comment*, and found himself catapulted into the headlines of the London papers. Within a day or two, he had even become the subject of a front-page story in *The New York Times*.

While the book contains a great deal else of interest, the furor was the result of a single chapter, Dover's account of what he calls the Aston affair. It is a short chapter, and the main facts of the affair are reasonably straightforward.

Trevor Aston, one of the senior fellows of Corpus Christi, was a problem that Dover found waiting for him when he arrived at the college as president in 1976. A medieval historian, Aston had published very little, but he was well known and widely respected in the profession as the editor of the quarterly journal *Past and Present*. (He had taken over in 1960, at a time when it had already moved away from its Marxist origins.) Unfortunately he also suffered from bouts of mental illness, exacerbated by heavy drinking. During his bad spells, his behavior was abusive, quarrelsome, and generally impossible, and at a college meeting in 1982, when his fellowship came up for what would normally have been automatic renewal, the vote in favor—though of course he wasn't told about it—was a markedly reluctant one. Subsequently things got even worse; there were complaints from the college staff, and the patience of colleagues was stretched to near breaking point.

In September 1985 there came what promised to be a respite. After his wife had made it clear to him that she was seeking a divorce, Aston took an overdose, and the doctor who treated him had him committed to a local psychiatric hospital. He was soon allowed to discharge himself, however, and on his return to the college, where he was now living full-time, his behavior proved wilder than ever. Finally, after a spate of unpleasant incidents, Dover called an informal meeting with six senior Fellows. They all agreed that they had to get rid of him—the problem was, how? Under the Corpus statutes, the only way he could be deprived of his fellowship was by a two-thirds majority of Fellows at a full-college meeting. But it was far from certain that a vote would produce the desired outcome. Some Fellows weren't around enough to know what dealing with Aston was really like, others might be unduly swayed by hope or compassion; and the effects of a botched attempt to remove him would inevitably be even worse than the existing situation.

Having decided not to run the risk, Dover turned for advice to Aston's doctor (whom Aston had forbidden ever to set foot in his rooms again) and to the two psychiatrists who had treated him in the hospital. They don't seem to have had any very positive suggestions, and certainly there was no question of compelling him to receive medical treatment; but the psychiatrists did at least approve of Dover's next step, which was to write to Aston, attempting to reason with him. One of them described the letter as "a model of its kind."

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Initially Aston appeared to respond favorably to what Dover had written, but it soon became clear that he was twisting his words to suit his purpose, and that he had no real intention of seeking help. In his frustration, Dover recalled an incident that he had been told about. Some years earlier Aston had rung up a colleague in the middle of the night and announced that he was going to commit suicide; the colleague had simply replied "Don't be a bloody fool" and put the phone down. Supposing the same circumstances arose again . . . It was a tempting prospect, tempting enough for Dover to consult a lawyer and ask what would happen if someone called to tell him that he had taken an overdose, and he deliberately did nothing about it. He was warned that it could lead to a charge of murder.

At their next meeting, Aston began indulging in paranoid accusations. He insisted that his relations with the other Fellows of the college had always been characterized by mutual affection, but that now his enemies were "using" Dover as an instrument to persecute him. In the heat of the moment Dover responded by revealing that three years earlier his fellowship had only been renewed by a narrow margin. Aston broke off the conversation, and in the days that followed he held forth to anyone who would listen on the grievous mistake the college had made in electing Dover president.

Then, one evening in mid-October, a woman friend of both men got in touch with Dover. She had been talking to Aston on the phone; she had had experience of suicide in her own family, and she was worried, very worried, by the way he had sounded. Dover once again consulted Aston's doctor; they agreed that the only way to get him to the hospital would be by force, and that the woman's worries weren't enough to justify them making such a drastic move. The doctor also reminded Dover that "Trevor is by far the cleverest manipulator I've ever encountered."

The next morning he was found dead. To judge from the two letters lying beside his bed, personal rather than college matters had been uppermost in his final thoughts. One was an official notification of the date of divorce proceedings, the other an affectionate letter of farewell to his wife.

The most obvious lesson to be drawn from the whole unhappy affair is that the college didn't have adequate machinery for dealing with it. There should surely have been an intermediate option between doing nothing and voting for Aston's outright dismissal. Possibly, since there wasn't, Dover would have done better to push ahead for dismissal (but six senior colleagues agreed with him that it would have been a mistake). Clearly he should have taken action on the night of Aston's death (but this is to speak with the wisdom of hindsight—and it was only after consulting a doctor that he decided not to). Ideally he shouldn't have revealed the reluctance with which Aston's fellowship had been renewed; but he was acting under point-blank provocation, and how many of us can be confident that we wouldn't have done the same?

If that were all, there would have been no headlines. What ensured a sensation was not so much the events themselves as Dover's manner of recounting them, and the apparent callousness of his attitude. One remark in particular did the trick. "It was clear to me by now," he writes—this was after he had finally despaired of persuading Aston to seek help—"that Trevor and the College must somehow be separated, and my problem was one which I feel compelled to define with brutal candour: how to kill him without getting into trouble."

John Darnton, commenting on this passage in *The New York Times*, said that it might have come from Dostoevsky or Poe. That seems to me pitching it too high. Several friends I spoke to told me they were irresistibly reminded of the Oxford-based television series "Inspector Morse"; personally I found myself recalling a half-forgotten world of donnish detective stories—*Death at the President's Lodging*, *Death in the Quadrangle*, *Landscape with Dead Dons*. And I suspect that most British newspaper-readers

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reacted to Dover's revelations in the same spirit. Aston's death was no doubt a tragedy, but the light in which Sir Kenneth presented his own actions seemed deliciously melodramatic.

This is not to say that there weren't many expressions of outrage. Dover was denounced for general heartlessness, for reverting to pagan, pre-Christian values, for attaching more importance to the smooth running of an institution than to an individual life. A letter to the London *Times* even compared his attitude to that of Caiaphas, the high priest in the New Testament: "Consider that it is expedient for us that one man should die for the people, and that the whole nation perish not."

Reading the book itself, as opposed to press reports, I found such reactions altogether disproportionate, but it is easy enough to see how they came about. The problem is partly one of omission—if only Dover had included a few more words of regret—and partly one of tone. Take his account of what he felt on the day after Aston's suicide, for instance:

> I got up from a long, sound sleep and looked out of the window across the Fellows' Garden. I can't say for sure that the sun was shining, but I certainly felt it was. I said to myself, slowly, "Day One of Year One of the Post-Astonian Era."

I don't find anything very shocking about this avowal myself, but I can see that some people might. How much less liable Dover would have been to upset them if he had been prepared to add even the mildest of emollient phrases, something along the lines of "I must admit that my overwhelming feeling was one of relief." How much less offense he would have given if, instead of talking about killing Aston, he had been content to say that he wished he was dead.

The Aston affair had put him, as it would have put anyone, under enormous strain (madmen can drive you mad), and it seems reasonable to suppose that the way in which he writes about it still reflects something of what he went through at the time. But his tough tone is also consistent with two characteristics which are apparent elsewhere in *Marginal Comment*—a refusal to get worked up about the fact of death as such (it depends on the circumstances) and an unusually strong conviction that it is our duty to tell the truth.

When he announces that he does not believe in the automatic sanctity of life, many of us will sympathize. (Where exactly do you locate the sanctity in the life of a Hitler or Stalin or Mao?) It is only when he elaborates that doubts begin to set in. "I would be quite happy," he writes, "to see capital punishment extended to the perpetrators of any long-planned and well-organised crime, including fraud." He gives no sign of having considered the possible brutalizing effect of such a policy, or of having reflected that in the twentieth century the imposition of the death penalty for "economic crimes" has been one of the hallmarks of totalitarianism. He is a humane man; but humane men sometimes advocate chilling measures.

As for his commitment to truth, no one is going to disagree with it in principle. But when he tells us that he prefers "nasty truths to silly lies," it is a lop-sided choice that he offers. What about brilliant lies, or useful lies, or merciful lies? What about truths that are not so much nice or nasty as elusive or debatable? What about being forced to choose between rival truths? These are complex matters, and it is a measure of how simplistic Dover can sometimes be when discussing them that he quotes with warm approval Bernard Levin's dubious dictum, "every euphemism is a lie." At one, not very interesting level, this is undeniable; but is it really wise or helpful to categorize anyone who judges it best to break bad news gently—a doctor, say, talking to a patient's family—as a liar?

Apart from the chapter on Aston, the most striking examples of iconoclastic candor in *Marginal Comment* are the passages dealing with sex. Even by today's standards they are remarkably direct, and the directness is re-

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inforced by a liberal use of four-letter words. It is all quite interesting, of course; but when Sir Kenneth tells us that in 1984, when he was sixty-four, he and his wife "had some of the best fucks of our life," I must admit that my pleasure at the good news is tempered by an old-fashioned sense of embarrassment.

For the most part, however, the book's outspokenness is an unambiguous strength. It gives the writing an edge; it helps to sustain one's interest through all but a few dull patches (mostly the ones about university administration). The most valuable sections are naturally those that portray, warts and all, the world of classical scholarship, but there are scarcely less absorbing accounts of Dover's childhood (South London suburbia, good-humored mother, father "with the foulest temper of anyone I knew or have known since"), of his teenage fascination, which was fueled purely by his own reading, with the languages of the Western Pacific, and of his war service (anti-aircraft batteries) in North Africa and Italy.

His honesty is principled honesty, too; he doesn't use it as an excuse for displays of ill nature. Many of his judgments, especially of fellow scholars, are severe, but they have none of the cattiness which he deplores as one of the vices of academic life, and perhaps Oxford life in particular. At the same time, he is human enough to concede that cattiness, if it is sufficiently skillful, has its regrettable appeal. He gives a memorable account of a famous papyrologist regaling a group of younger men with derogatory comments, "designed to cut as deep and painfully as possible," on an edition by an equally famous textual scholar. "I can't pretend," he adds, "that I didn't enjoy beautifully expressed malevolence." But that was forty years ago, and some pleasures turn sour. Looking back, he now finds those same comments unimpressive.

The most interesting chapter in the book, apart from the one on Aston, deals with another "affair"—equally controversial, and in the long run more significant. It was during Dover's presidency of the British Academy that Anthony Blunt, who was a Fellow of the Academy, was exposed as a spy. Blunt refused to resign, and although Dover was eager to see the last of him, he didn't feel that there was anything in the Academy statutes that would have warranted expulsion. His account of the episode and its complications is well worth reading, and it will be of considerable value to historians, but it doesn't show him in an altogether satisfactory light; at one point he manages to sound more angered by the maneuvers of those Fellows who were determined to force Blunt out than by the thought of what Blunt had actually done. In the end, however, he strikes the right note—when he reminds himself that a KGB man convicted of treason like Blunt's would have been "stoked into a boiler furnace by his indignant colleagues."

With all its oddities and blemishes, Dover has written an excellent book. The sensational bits are what will inevitably attract readers first, and stay with most of them longest; but it still deserves to be judged—and recommended—as a whole.

A postscript. We have almost certainly not heard the last of the Aston affair. A number of Aston's friends and former colleagues have come to his defense, and one of them, the historian James Howard-Johnston, is planning to gather together a *Festschrift* in his memory. In the meantime Howard-Johnston has prepared a memorandum on the affair, which, according to a newspaper report, partly deals with an incident of which there is no mention in *Marginal Comment*. Shortly before Aston's death, it was discovered that a valuable color-plate book had been taken out of the Corpus library in his name and not returned; on the morning before he committed suicide (or so says the report), Dover told him that the matter was going to be investigated by a committee of senior Fellows.

How much such an incident might have weighed with him, we can only guess; but it lends a rather eerie resonance to Dover's statement, in another section of his book,

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that "I have never yet experienced what could properly be called grief at anybody's death. At their suffering, yes; I can be torn to pieces by other people's suffering; but death has always seemed like the return of a book to the stack."

The Sphinx of Athens

Hugh Lloyd-Jones, editor & translator Sophocles.
Vol. 1: Ajax, Electra, Oedipus Tyrannus. 483 pages, $19.95.
Vol. 2: Antigone, The Women of Trachis, Philoctetes, Oedipus at Colonus. 599 pages, $19.95.
Loeb Classical Library/
Harvard University Press

reviewed by Donald Lyons

"Some things were current once that are current no longer. A public for an inexpensive bilingual Dante—Italian text, notes, and a facing version in unpretentious prose. . . . It was not presumed that the reader knew Italian, but that, possessing some acquaintance with Latin or one of the Romance languages, he would welcome a prose guide to the very words of the master in the original." Hugh Kenner, writing here about the early years of the century, had his eye on the J. M. Dent edition of Dante but might as appropriately have instanced the Loeb Classical Library. The Loebs, published by Harvard for eighty-odd years, boast of being the only series to give access, in facing translations from Greek and Latin, to "all that is important in Greek and Latin literature." (In some deep Rimbaldian color sense, Greek is forever green and Latin red to those reared on Loebs.) The Loebs, and editions like them, became a lifelong resource for an educated public wishing to keep in touch with writings that had nourished them in their salad days but that were written in languages the continuing study of which had not proved possible in their adult lives.

One drawback, however, to the civilizing potency of the Loebs was the quality of the translations, at least from poetry. It is not that they were pedestrian or prosaic. Rather, they teetered on the stilts of an archaizing, poeticizing diction, half pre-Raphaelite, half-biblical (the sort of Swinburnian ickiness Eliot stigmatized in "Euripides and Professor Murray.") I still remember a phrase from the Loeb Pindar by Sir John Sandys that, in school, gave us infinite delight: "High emprise brooketh no coward wight." I have to hand a 1912 Loeb Euripides. Here is Electra's husband addressing her in the *Electra*: "If thus thou wilt, thy message will I bear/ To yon grey sire: but pass thou in with speed,/ And there make ready. Women's will can find/ Many a thing shall eke the feasting out./ Yea . . ." (This translation has, I believe, not been updated by the Loeb.) Who would be tempted by language like this to "keep up their classics"? Who would think them worth keeping up? One is not far here from Housman's "Fragment of a Greek Tragedy"—a short but deadly work of diction-demolition that begins:

> O suitably attired in leather boots
> Head of a traveler, wherefore seeking whom
> Whence by what way how purposed art thou
> come
> To this well-nightingaled vicinity?
> My object in enquiring is to know.
> But if you happen to be deaf and dumb
> And do not understand a word I say,
> Nod with your hand, to signify as much.

(What makes Housman so waspishly, so insolently deadly is that he manages to sting not just the banalities of Victorian poetic diction but the rhetorical conventions of the Greeks themselves.)

Happy news is, then, the arrival of a wholly new Loeb Sophocles. It's in two volumes, each a bargain at $19.95. The facing Greek is a corrected version of the 1990 Oxford Classical text edited by Hugh Lloyd-Jones and Nigel Wilson; the English is by Lloyd-Jones and is described by him as without "literary pretensions, being in-

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tended as an aid to those who wish to understand the Greek text that is printed opposite." Sir Hugh is providing, that is, what Nabokov, in rendering *Eugene Onegin*, called a metaphrase—a scrupulous, bare explanation of the original.

By way of testing the new Loeb as English, let us compare its version of a key Sophoclean passage with that of several well-regarded contemporary translations. There is a speech early in the *Antigone* wherein the headstrong heroine first reveals to her timid sister Ismene the emotional depths of her commitment to their dead but unburied brother, wherein, indeed, she first shows herself to be more than half in love with death itself. Here is Lloyd-Jones (L-J):

> ANTIGONE: Do you be the kind of person you have decided to be, but I shall bury him! It is honourable for me to do this and die. I am his own and I shall lie with him who is my own, having committed a crime that is holy, for there will be a longer span of time for me to please those below than there will be to please those here. As for you, if it is your pleasure, dishonour what the gods honour!
>
> ISMENE: I am not dishonouring them, but I do not have it in me to act against the will of the people of the city.

Plainspun prose indeed, but attractively diaphanous. We can be pretty sure that these were the exact lexical intentions of Sophocles, that the Greek says *at least* this, and that all the Greek has been rendered.[1] By contrast, in two earlier translations of the *Antigone* we cannot repose these confidences. In 1938, Dudley Fitts and Robert Fitzgerald made a verse translation of the *Antigone* that was later to make part of their so-called *Oedipus Cycle*. The three plays, issued in a striking early Harvest paperback, became perhaps the most famous and successful Englishing of Greek tragedy in the century. Here is their try at this passage:

> ANTIGONE: You have made your choice,
> you can be what you want to be.
> But I will bury him; and if I must die,
> I say that this crime is holy: I shall lie down
> With him in death, and I shall be as dear
> To him as he to me.
> It is the dead,
> Not the living, who make the longest demands:
> We die for ever . . .
> You may do as you like,
> Since apparently the laws of the gods mean nothing to you.
>
> ISMENE: They mean a great deal to me; but I have no strength
> To break laws that were made for the public good.

There is much to praise in the clean diction of these pentameters. One senses the determination to do away for good with nineteenth-century fustian and biblicalizing, to produce a modern-sounding, a pronounceable text. But fifty-six years later, these lines seem to sacrifice a great deal to achieve their smart, Thirties speakability. "If I must die" is much politer than the Greek; "lie down" and "dear" sound weekendy and cozy next to the fierce erotic perversity of the Greek, which is much more nearly gotten in L-J's barer "lie" and "my own." "We die for ever . . ." (note the chic, unwarranted ellipsis) has a soulful, period glamour that cannot but call to mind, proleptically, Auden's "We must love one another or die." "Apparently" is drawing-room sarcasm, limitedly Brit in tone. And finally, "the public good"—no doubt meant to sound like an evasive cliché in Ismene's mouth—is unfair to Ismene, whose prudent common sense is more clearly and faithfully rendered by L-J.

Fitts and Fitzgerald announced as a principle that "we have not hesitated to use free paraphrase when a literal rendering of the Greek would result in obscurity." The upshot

1 Only pretty sure, though. There is a phrase in the Greek after "to please those here" that says "for there will I lie forever." I do not find this is L-J at all. Homer nodding?

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of such a procedure, though, is that one gets the poetic sensibilities of the renderers rather than that of the original. This may be OK if the renderer is Yeats or Pound, each of whom turned a hand to Sophocles. (As did, and with some good results, the polymath John Jay Chapman. His *Antigone* [1930], while still largely archaic in diction, manages many striking successes. For example, he has Antigone say, "A lover by my loved one I shall lie/ Within the grave my crime has sanctified.") It is a much more mixed blessing if the poets are Fitts and Fitzgerald, spry, smart, world-weary, politically clever. In reviewing the Gilbert Murray versions of Euripides, Eliot remarked that "as a poet, Mr. Murray is merely a very insignificant follower of the pre-Raphaelite movement." It would not be unjust to say that, as poets, Fitts and Fitzgerald were—not insignificant, but minor—followers of the Auden–Day Lewis–MacNeice movement. Their Sophocles was tonic in its day but now seems altogether caught up in the West End and the Spanish Civil War.

In 1982, Robert Fagles translated Sophocles into verse for a new Penguin edition. Here are the lines from the *Antigone* as done by him:

> ANTIGONE: So, do as you like, whatever suits
> you best—
> I will bury him myself.
> And even if I die in the act, that death will be
> a glory.
> I will lie with the one I love and loved by him—
> an outrage sacred to the gods! I have longer
> to please the dead than please the living here:
> in the kingdom down below I'll lie forever.
> Do as you like, dishonor the laws
> the gods hold in honor.
>
> ISMENE: I'd do them no
> dishonor . . .
> but defy the city? I have no strength for that.

Fagles's broken, five-beat lines bespeak the presence in the poetic air of Ezra Pound, Robert Lowell, Richmond Lattimore, and of Robert Fitzgerald himself (Fitzgerald went on, in his Homer, to do richer work than his Sophocles). Note, for instance, how the nervous dash has become the punctuation of choice, almost ousting the smug ellipsis. Fagles is a gifted and scholarly versifier, but "do as you like" is less interesting than the Greek, which says, "be what you are." L-J's "do you be the kind of person you have decided to be" teases out the full lexical implications behind Sophocles' four simple words. The flatness of L-J's dogged plenitude of statement is evident, but it is the price we pay for trust in his adequacy to Sophocles' meaning. "I will lie with the one I love and loved by him" is franker than Fitts-Fitzgerald, but too much like a country-western lyric to shock us by salutary strangeness. L-J's "I am his own . . ." is not only a fresher, wilder expression (it's like a phrase out of Emily Brontë), but it cunningly reproduces the bracketing placement of the Greek words *phile . . . philou*. "Kingdom down below" has a cutesy, Disney-*Little Mermaid* lilt; there is no "kingdom" in Sophocles. As for the "laws" that pop up in Fitts-Fitzgerald, in Fagles, and in Chapman, they're not in the Greek, which has Antigone refer generally to "what [things] the gods honor." Only later, in a famous passage, will Antigone cite, by way of justifying her defiance of King Creon, "the unwritten and unfailing ordinances of the gods" (L-J)—and there too L-J is more accurate with "ordinances" than Fitts-Fitzgerald ("laws") or Fagles ("traditions"). Here, though, she is vaguer and less specific. This is just the sort of thing we can lean on L-J for. "The city" (Fagles) is better than the "the public good" (Fitts-Fitzgerald), but Sophocles writes *politon*, people of the *polis*, a key word in this play and in all of Greek tragedy. L-J's "people of the city" is palmary.

Professor Fagles, who was later to do a fine version of the *Iliad*, shows in his Sophocles, I think, the weakness of what might be called the Pound tradition when it essays drama, rather than epic narrative. This mode of diction seems to lack a certain patience—even humility—somehow needed in rendering drama. What may work in

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snapshots from Alexandrian epic (Pound doing Ovid in "Canto 2") or in the lyric of urban angst (Pound doing Propertius in the wonderful "Homage to Sextus Propertius") looks in a play like an unsteadiness of tone, a lurching for sudden effect (that "outrage sacred" is merely cacophonic). There is a desire to be at once, or in quick succession, idiomatic and grandiose. It may, as I say, work in flashes, like lightning over the broad and capacious plains of epic, but it is not at home in drama.

The sauceless pasta of L-J's prose is, then, just right for today's taste, which is intolerant of another's poetic sensibility interposed between itself and Sophocles. And for those who crave seasoning, there is the garden of delights waiting to be plucked on the sinister side of the page. And Sophocles is worth learning Attic Greek for.

Reading the seven Sophocles plays in the new Loeb version only confirms his impenetrable greatness. Of the three great Greek tragedians, he is the Sphinx. We feel we know what Aeschylus before him was up to—using the deep myths to make spiritual and civic sense of the world; we feel we know what Euripides after (and alongside) him was up to—remanipulating these myths to show up the spiritual and civic nonsense at the heart of things. But Sophocles had a mind too fine to be violated by even such awesome projects as these. Not that all writers on him would agree: a simplistic formula, often resorted to by tendentious sorts, is to label Sophocles the master of irony, either for his structural habit of following rejoicing with disillusionment or for his general love of contrasting ideas. Thus, from Hegel to George Steiner, Sophocles' early *Antigone* has been taken as his most characteristic work and as depicting an irreconcilable clash of valid rights. The play, according to Steiner, expresses "all the principal constants of conflict in the condition of man. These constants are fivefold: the confrontation of men and women; of age and of youth; of society and of the individual; of the living and the dead; of men and of god(s)." The hybristic swagger of such reductionism is worthy of Dickens's Gradgrind and condemns itself, but the intention behind it is evident: to turn Sophocles into a spokesman for a postmodern *aporia*, for a tolerant refusal of moral choice, for a multivalent "openness." It is dismally familiar.

Another regnant image of Sophocles in this half-century has been that of the celebrator of heroic humanism concerned to show how unmerited suffering nobly borne raises man to the gods and becomes somehow itself a transcendent value. This approach is associated with the name of Bernard Knox. Oedipus is its star exhibit.

A wiser and deeper approach than those of the ideologues or the humanists was sketched by John F. Finley, Jr.:

> Sophocles' long life of ninety-one years spanned the fifth century. An Athenian general in middle life, friend of Pericles, Herodotus, and doubtless nearly all the great figures of the age, he was thought fortunate to die a year before the defeat of Athens by Sparta, the capture of the city, and the end of that greatest period of her long life. Hence he surely felt the intellectual revolution that accompanied his middle years . . . the substitution of conceptual for mythological thought. Protagoras and Anaxagoras were roughly the same age as he, Democritus a few years younger, and Socrates a quarter-century younger. The structure of the plays shows intellectual refinement; the *Antigone*, for example, is cut like a diamond into facets of antithesis: between the strong and the weaker sister, Antigone and Ismene; between father and son, Creon and Haemon; and centrally between Creon and Antigone, the one vindicating the state, the other the family. And yet this intellectual influence, however strong, seems at bottom not to have touched, much less to have impaired, his mythological cast of mind; it simply chiseled and refined it, as if by opposition it made it more aware of itself. . . . When one tries to imagine Sophocles' youth and the impression on him that Aeschylus' sweeping tragedies must have made, there seems something inspired in the self-fidelity which told him that such wide

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> prospects were not for him; his reality would be narrower, more urgent, more interior.

This emphasis on the interiority of Sophocles accords well with observations by Edmund Wilson in his extraordinary 1941 essay on the *Philoctetes* in *The Wound and the Bow*, wherein he spoke of Sophocles' "cool observation of psychological derangements" and of the "insane or obsessed people of Sophocles."

This psychologizing approach was brought home in the play that struck me most vividly this time, the *Electra*. While in some measure the *Electra* amounts to a reworking of the *Antigone*, gone are the early play's stark antitheses. The later play also opens at dawn; birds are singing as, this time, the beloved brother, Orestes, shows up alive but in secret. The mad sister, all unaware, engages in a full expression of her madness to and with the chorus. She acknowledges, as the righteous Antigone did not, the deformations that obsession and hatred (plus illusage) have wrought upon her character. She next clashes with a timid and prudent sister, Chrysothemis, who desires to comply with the tyranny, which here is mother Clytemnestra and mother's lover Aegisthus. Chrysothemis tells Electra that the tyrants plan to shut her recalcitrant self up in a cave, as had happened to Antigone. Enter the oppressor-cum-mother to fight with the heroine about the ethics of the past. There then comes the report of Orestes' death in a chariot accident at the Pythian games—a false but brilliant narrative, one of the playwright's supreme dramaturgical ironies. Mother rejoices; sister/daughter laments. Next the weak sister enters with news that she's seen signs of Orestes' presence—news Electra greets with extravagant contempt. Electra tells her sister their brother is dead and urges a joint sisterly slaughter of Clytemnestra and Aegisthus. Chrysothemis recoils. At this point—four hundred lines from the play's end—Orestes re-enters carrying his own ashes and prompting Electra to cry to her "dead" brother thus: "[R]eceive me into this mansion of yours, receive me who am nothing into nothingness, so that in future I may live with you below." Three hundred lines from the end, Orestes deigns to identify himself to a sister berserk with grief. After a spate of mutual rejoicing, the son goes within to dispatch the mother, who is, from within, heard briefly objecting to her fate. Aegisthus, who'd been away in the suburbs for the day, comes on to make sure of the good news about Orestes, whose covered body is wheeled out for his delectation. Except, of course, that it is the body of his mistress, Clytemnestra. Having lifted the cover and ascertained the true situation, he is firmly escorted within by Orestes, who says, "Go to where you killed my father. . . . I have to see that this tastes bitter for you" (L-J). And it is on this chord of rising violence and of hovering vengeance that the play ends. It is an astonishing and chilling finale, a bold *coup de théâtre* unparalleled in Greek tragedy.

This summary description of the *Electra* can give no idea of the ways the play deploys psychic states and types and moments in contradistinction to and collaboration with one another. As an investigation of conflict among deformed psyches, it is immensely more complex and subtle than the *Antigone*, which it so much resembles; it is, let us say, *Hamlet* to the earlier play's *Richard II*. Although it is Euripides who is supposed to be the psychologist among Greek tragedians, beside Sophocles his studies of abandoned erotic passion—his *Medea*s and *Phaedra*s—seem simplistic in structure and concept. Even when Sophocles is, rarely, treating eros—as in the characters of Heracles and his wife in the *Women of Trachis*—his eyes seem to be directed elsewhere. He all but ignores the "engagement" of Antigone to Creon's son Haemon in the *Antigone*; their relationship seems always just out of sight, although even as clever and original an observer of the Greeks as Chapman called the play "a great love story." Sophocles likes to show obsession obliquely, as in the brother-sister relationships in *Antigone* and *Electra* and in the relations of friendship in *Philoctetes*, and he

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avoids overtly "resolving" the psychic disharmonies he displays. The only resolutions of the conflicts in his art are the shapes themselves of the plays. Thinking about a play of Sophocles is somehow very like thinking about *Washington Square* or *The Golden Bowl*.

Greatest living Irishman

Donald Harman Akenson
Conor: A Biography of
Conor Cruise O'Brien.
Cornell University Press,
573 pages, $35

Donald Harman Akenson, editor
Conor Cruise O'Brien Anthology.
Cornell University Press,
356 pages, $39.95

reviewed by Mark Falcoff

Conor Cruise O'Brien is one of the most extraordinary personalities of the late twentieth century. Born in Ireland in 1917, he has been successively a civil servant, diplomat, U.N. official, academic administrator, member of the Irish parliament, Irish minister for posts and telegraphs, journalist, and author of a half-dozen first-rate books and several hundred articles, ranging from literary criticism to political philosophy and international affairs. Though well-grounded in Irish history and culture (unlike most of his countrymen, he is fully fluent in Gaelic), O'Brien has lived and worked in France, Britain, America, and Africa, and is a veteran of politics and the culture wars in each.

By the time O'Brien burst upon the American intellectual scene in the early 1960s he already had behind him a fairly extensive career in the Irish civil service and at the United Nations, and was widely known (under the literary pseudonym Donat O'Donnell) as a learned and intelligent critic of François Mauriac, Paul Claudel, and Evelyn Waugh. He came to New York via Ghana, where as vice chancellor of the University of Ghana he had somewhat naïvely tried to reconcile Western academic standards with the more sinister political agenda of dictator Kwame Nkrumah. After several years he returned to Ireland to enter parliament as a member of the Labour Party, and, after a ministerial tour, subsequently served as editor of the London *Observer*. For the last three decades he has almost never been absent from American magazines and bookshops. These two hefty volumes attest to one publisher's certainty of his enduring interest.

Part of the fascination which O'Brien exercises over Americans—this reviewer very specifically included—is that he is that rarest of things, a genuine European intellectual. (Actually, there are almost no European intellectuals, even as there are really no Europeans—just Germans trying to pass themselves off as something other than what they are.) In O'Brien's case, it is a question not only of broad cultural interests or strong linguistic skills but of an outlook which is the very opposite of parochial. That he is Irish is all the more extraordinary, given that the country in which he grew up, as his biographer explains, was steeped in "medieval theology, nineteenth-century economic orthodoxy, linguistic nationalism, and dominant social conventions."

Moreover, though he has always thought of himself as a man of the left, he has never shown much patience for other leftists who refuse to call things by their proper names. On the two occasions on which I have had the opportunity to hear him speak, both well over twenty years ago, he left the *soi-disant* progressives in the audience quite aghast with his politically incorrect observations—one having to do with the legacy of colonialism in Africa, the other with Mao Ze-dong's theories on art and literature.

Donald Harman Akenson, apparently with O'Brien's approval and assistance, has taken on the task of painting a full-dress portrait, a kind of life and times. The idea is excellent; the execution, alas, is far, far less. For the most part *Conor* is a plodding piece of work,

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its few bright moments separated by extensive *longueurs*. Those patient enough to slog ever-onward will be rewarded with interesting tidbits on Joyce's Dublin, where O'Brien's parents participated in a small but brilliant literary-political cénacle, on Trinity College and the Irish diplomatic service, on the United Nations, and on the politics of the Congo, where O'Brien briefly played an important diplomatic role. However, when the narrative reaches the Sixties, it takes on a rather querulous tone, since Akenson, an American expatriate academic living and working in Canada, seems to have a number of personal scores to settle with his country of origin. This introduces something of a false note, since O'Brien—unlike his biographer—has never been an "anti-American."

This point is best illustrated by the middle section of the book, which deals with O'Brien's years in New York (1965–69), where he taught and ran a humanities program at New York University. Here Akenson resurrects those inconceivably remote days when American institutions of higher learning could be called "traditionalist" and *The New York Times* "conservative" (both used as terms of opprobrium). He takes little note, however, of the fact that over the last twenty-five years the American intellectual community (and particularly that part of it centered in New York) has become exactly what O'Brien once wanted it to be—less still that today's O'Brien is not particularly happy with the result.

In the course of reading this book I was reminded more than once of Cyril Connolly's dictum on Robert Sencourt's biography of T. S. Eliot: "I am sure that the late Robert Sencourt had many interesting things to say . . . but the way he said them is creepy, mealy-mouthed, and crypto-malicious." In the specific case of *Conor*, the treatment of far too many individuals and institutions is flatly inaccurate. To correct Professor Akenson on matters of detail would extend this review to many times its present length, but one cannot forbear from setting the record straight on at least a few major points. American culture is not—as he claims—locked in the thrall of Flat Earthers, though if it were one cannot help wondering where that would leave the culture of his beloved Canada (or for that matter, Ireland). Alger Hiss experienced difficulties with the American judicial system not because he was a Communist, as Professor Akenson seems to think, but rather because he chose to express his ideological convictions by joining a Soviet espionage ring. To dismiss Robert Conquest as "a free-lance, somewhat right-wing commentator" is rather like describing Beethoven as "a well-known Viennese pianist." Nor is the late *Encounter* magazine "a meretricious bit of colportage." Michael Oakeshott is not "a fraud and apt to attract other frauds," even if O'Brien thinks so (or once thought so). The anti-Sandinista forces in Nicaragua were not "a gang of right-wing terrorists," and the Sandinista government was not "popularly approved." (I refer Professor Akenson to the most recent elections.)

Worse still, Akenson obscures the full meaning of his hero's intellectual trajectory. True, he does show that O'Brien, who started out as a conventional Irish nationalist and leftish "anti-imperialist," has come to understand that small, helpless peoples are just as capable of cruelty and injustice as large and powerful ones, and that even the oppressed have no moral right to take on the role of oppressors at the first available opportunity. Thus in his latest phase, O'Brien no longer favors forcible union of the Ulster counties with the Republic of Ireland, and on this subject has even taken on the magnificos of American Irish politics. "I know that you all genuinely want to help Ireland," he told them. "The trouble is, that the Ireland you want to help doesn't exist, and that your efforts have the effect of making things worse, not better, in the Ireland of reality." (In this connection there is a delicious episode involving Senator Edward Kennedy which is nearly worth the price of the book.)

But Akenson seems not to grasp—possibly because it is not his own particular cup of tea—that O'Brien has undergone a major ideological shift as well, from *marxisant* left-

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ist to classical liberal, evidenced by his book on Israel (*The Siege*, 1986) and, more recently, by his extensive vindication of Edmund Burke (*The Great Melody*, 1992). In effect, O'Brien has become a neoconservative in just about everything except name. (The fact that he has gone out of his way in recent years to attack frontally American neoconservatives like Norman Podhoretz in no way diminishes the full depth and range of his conversion; in some ways it merely confirms it by indirection.) Indeed, the germs of his present stance can even be found in pieces written more than three decades ago.

This, at any rate, is clear from the *Anthology*, which in most ways is more interesting and revealing than the biography. A few choice morsels will serve to buttress my case. Reviewing Edmund Wilson's *Apologies to the Iroquois*, O'Brien writes that "the eighteenth century pronounced the Savage noble, in cheerful ignorance of how the Savage behaved; the twentieth century, having had the opportunity to study all varieties of savagery, refuses to pronounce a value-judgement at all" (1960). Of James Baldwin he remarks, "because Uncle Tom is an anti-communist, it does not follow that Mr. Baldwin, to be justified, must be a communist, or pretend to be a communist, or even sedulously refrain from letting it be known that he is not a communist" (1964). On Brian Crozier's *Neo-Colonialism*: "The fate of [South Vietnam's] Ngo Dinh Diem is not, as Mr. Crozier suggests, a proof that the unfortunate man was never a puppet, but a reminder that politicians who belong objectively to the puppet class are wiser not to attempt to go on the legitimate stage" (1965).

Or here is his comment on Frantz Fanon's *Wretched of the Earth*: "As far as violence and power are concerned, colonialism introduced no new principles into Africa, merely the more effective application of existing principles" (1965). This is followed by a wonderfully wicked sendup of UNESCO, when that unfortunate organization was busily trying to impose something it called the New World Information Order. People—according to Mr. Ferdinand Mayor, the current secretary-general of the organization—are "over-informed" (*sur-informé*), from which it follows that they "need to be put on some sort of diet, so that they get just the right kind of information, in just the right quantity." O'Brien says that "UNESCO is the right body to prescribe and supervise such a diet. After all, most of its member-Governments have been regulating, rationing and filtering the news for years" (1979).

My own personal favorite deals with that all-purpose fraud, Professor Ali A. Mazrui, who for some unaccountable reason was invited to give the BBC's prestigious Reith Lectures. Mazrui's "notion of one continent 'raping' another is a hollow trope," O'Brien wrote. "The reality was one of exploitation of weak people by strong people . . . I have never met an Ashanti who was anything but proud of the Ashanti Empire, or who was in the least ashamed of the part played by the slave trade in the growth of that powerful and predatory polity" (1980).

O'Brien's integrity and independence of mind is all the more impressive because he had no personal fortune upon which to fall back, no tenured academic position, no permanent preferment. Nor did he enjoy the support—as have so many left-wing intellectuals from small countries—of some international organization, party international, or great power. He has worked hard all his life, produced an immense corpus of work, greatly illuminated discussion of some of the fundamental issues of the day, and happiest of all, he shows no signs of retiring.

The diligent Madame C.

Susan Quinn
Marie Curie: A Life.
Simon & Schuster, 509 pages, $30

reviewed by Gerald Weissmann

On April 19, 1906, the forty-seven-year-old Nobel laureate Pierre Curie was run over by an oversize, horse-drawn wagon filled with

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bales of army uniforms. He was negotiating that tricky Parisian intersection where traffic from the rue Dauphine, the quai Conti, the quai des Grands Augustins, and the pont Neuf have created Gallic havoc for over a century. Curie had just quit a meeting of reform-minded University professors where he argued for legislation to improve the lot of junior faculty and to prevent laboratory accidents. He had planned to stop at his publisher's office on the quai, but because of a strike—by equally reform-minded trade unionists—the office was shut. Absent-minded and somewhat radium-sick, he turned away in the spring rain, and was on his way to the library of the Institut when that six-ton wagon rumbled down the bridge from the Ile de la Cité to crush his skull.

His death brought to an end two remarkably creative careers in physical science, his own and that of his wife, Maria Salomea Sklodowska—known to the world as Madame Curie. She later recollected that on the rue Dauphine "I lost my beloved Pierre, and with him all hope and all support for the rest of my life." She was right: for although Madame Curie was to survive her husband until 1934, her contributions to science after his death were less than innovative; she turned her tough mind to the application of their discoveries, to teaching young scientists, and to construction of the Radium Institute which she turned into a world center of physical science. She also became a secular saint of feminist culture on both sides of the Atlantic, the subject of her daughter's hagiographic best-seller, *Madame Curie* (1937), and heroine of sentimental publicists who hailed her for real or fancied radium cures. "More nonsense has been written about radium than the philosopher's stone" complained George Bernard Shaw in 1931, and he was also right.

But there was no nonsense about the science. What a run the two Curies had together! In the course of six short years they had laid the foundations for the next century of physics and set the clock of our atomic age. That work earned Pierre and Marie Curie an acclaimed Nobel Prize in Physics (with Henri Becquerel in 1903) and Marie a more controversial Nobel Prize in Chemistry (1911). Those six years are the centerpiece of Susan Quinn's earnest new biography of Marie, which, perhaps in keeping with the temperament of its subject, is written with more diligence than grace.

The Curies were married in 1895, and shortly thereafter Pierre, who had already become famous for his work with his older brother Jacques on piezoelectricity (some crystals, e.g. ceramic or bone, generate an electric current when compressed), won his doctorate for studies with Paul Langevin on paramagnetic resonance (the moment of an atom or electron varies inversely with the temperature). It was the year that Roentgen took the first picture of the bones of his wife's hand by means of his novel rays.

By 1897, Henri Becquerel had found that uranium also produced rays—"emanations"—that left Roentgen-like shadows on photographic plates kept in the dark. Almost simultaneously, William Thomson, Lord Kelvin, discovered that the "ionizing" emanations from uranium imparted an electric charge to the air. In December of that year, Pierre and Marie set out to quantify the Becquerel emanations—ionizing radiation—of a great variety of natural substances. For this purpose they employed the piezoelectric quartz balance, an instrument that Pierre had designed, and by February had found that the residue of pitchblende from which uranium had been extracted gave far greater signals than uranium itself. They correctly deduced that there was an ionizing substance far more active than uranium lurking in the sticky brew. It was the month that Zola wrote *J'Accuse* and France split forever into the *dreyfusards* and their opponents.

By the end of 1898, the Curies had postulated that the new element "radium" decayed into another, "polonium"; they had also named the new elements and called their emanations "radioactivity." In 1902, by means of heroic preparative procedures, Marie Curie at last isolated radium in pure

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form. Meanwhile, late in 1902, Pierre calculated that one gram of radium emitted 3.7×10^{10} disintegrations per second: we call this amount of radioactivity one Curie. And shortly thereafter he made the heuristic discovery that one gram of radium could heat one gram of water from 0 to 100° Celsius: we call this sort of transformation "atomic energy" and it nowadays powers more than half of France. By 1903 Pierre and Marie Curie had won the Nobel Prize: they had also come down with the first signs of radium sickness.

Six unmatched years of discovery in the setting of the Third Republic; axes drawn between right and left, church and state, theory and application, risk and benefit of a new science in a new century. It's a grand story and while the Curies are on the spoor of the new, with the Dreyfus case breaking about them, Susan Quinn's popular narrative rolls on briskly. But after Pierre's death on the rue Dauphine, the story of Marie Curie becomes less a life in science, and more a tale of The Career, The Scandal, and The Legend. Quinn leads us through the details of Marie Curie's affair with Paul Langevin and the outrageous attacks on her by the anti-*dreyfusard* press; we are given an extensive account of the mobile X-ray units she organized during the First World War and how a grateful France forgave her in the course of permitting her to establish the Radium Institute.

Quinn does not examine what inner doubts or conflicts might have troubled the pale, intense widow in a plain black dress who lived on the fashionable quai de Béthune, the *entrepreneuse* who raised millions in France and the United States for her Institute by encouraging claims of cures for cancer. Nor does she offer insights into what must have been the remarkable relationship between Madame Curie and her daughter, a physicist at her mother's Institute, who married a brilliant young co-worker to play out the story of *Marie et Pierre Redux*. Irène and Frédéric Joliot-Curie shared not only another Nobel Prize (for induced radioactivity) in 1935, but also an abiding attachment to Soviet Communism. From the quai Béthune to the Red Flag! The political and dynamic undertones of this part of the story are barely hinted at. Indeed, Quinn's biographic method is to navigate the shoals of personality, dodging the rocks of inner life and the sandbars of psychological insight: just the facts, ma'am, is what she gives us. But since her biography of a scientist doesn't contain quite enough science to engage the scientific, one misses the literary tug of the family romance. That would have been just fine with Madame C: except for some painful letters addressed to her husband after his death, her private voice was as impersonal as her public speech.

The Curies met in 1894 and were made for each other. Both Marie Sklodowska, daughter of a Polish *gymnasium* teacher, and Pierre, son of a Communard homeopath, were raised in the frugal folkways of the hard-working *petit bourgeoisie*. Quinn gives us some of that flavor—and a unique grasp of genetics—in describing how Marie's mother had learned to cobble her children's shoes. "Such willingness to do manual work was inherited by her youngest daughter, and was essential to Marie's success many years later in isolating radium." The intensity with which the Curies stare at us from portraits in Quinn's book suggest that what Einstein said of Marie might have applied to Pierre as well: "Madame Curie is very intelligent but has the soul of a herring, which means she is poor when it comes to the art of joy and pain."

The two cold fish had sought each other out from among a flashier school of broadly cultivated, anticlerical scientists that had assembled around the Sorbonne at *fin de siècle*. Those glittering mathematicians, physicists, and chemists formed the phalanx of the positivist movement and became a vanguard of the *dreyfusards*. Nowadays they are ignored in "cultural" histories of the Third Republic (Jerrold Seigel's *Bohemian Paris* and Eugen Weber's *France, Fin de Siècle* come to mind). But as Quinn reminds us—in vignettes distilled from the *Dictionary of*

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Scientific Biography—their discoveries have earned them permanent places in the history of science. To some, their lives and work constitute a monument to reason that their contemporaries in the arts have eschewed. Official France agrees: their names, Quinn fails to remind the reader, are part of the fabric of Paris. The square before the Ecole polytechnique (4ème) is named after the dashing but very married Paul Langevin, who Einstein said would have discovered relativity had he himself not done so and whose affair with the widowed Marie almost cost her the second Nobel Prize. The square before the Sorbonne (4ème) is named after mathematician Paul Painlevé, who was Langevin's second at the duel he fought to preserve Madame Curie's honor. Also an early supporter of Einstein, he was politic enough to become a minister of war. Langevin quipped that Painlevé had studied Einstein thoroughly, though unfortunately not until after he had written about him, a sequence acquired perhaps in politics. Marie's other partisans in the Curie-Langevin scandal dot the landscape as well: Gabriel Lippmann, the Nobel physicist who invented color reproduction and who presented the Curies' discovery of radium to the Académie des Sciences, is remembered behind the place de la Nation (20ème); Paul Appell, dean of the Faculty of Sciences, has an avenue of his own near the Cité Universitaire (14ème)—it leads to the avenue Rockefeller; the rue Henri Poincaré loops off the boulevard Gambetta (20ème); and the rue Emil Borel is off the boulevard Périphérique in the 17ème. Those Sorbonne positivists were targeted by Léon Daudet in *l'Action Française* when he joined the successful attack on Marie Curie's nomination to the Académie:

> [The] fanatic Dreyfusard Darboux, permanent secretary of the Academy of Sciences . . . [the] fanatic Dreyfusard Poincaré—a man of genius, they say, in mathematics but stupid and hateful when it comes to the rest— . . . the Jew of color photography Lippmann, [the] fanatic Dreyfusard Appell, dean of the Faculty of Sciences . . . no longer hide behind the life of the Saints, but behind algebra, physics and chemistry treatises . . . They intend in fact to chase from the house all those who don't think like them, don't feel like them, who have the audacity not to deny God, not to insult Rome, go to mass, to raise their children as Christians.

Quinn handles this episode deftly, but within this passage, she feels obligated to identify Tartuffe as "Molière's religious hypocrite." It is difficult, therefore, to know for whom this book was written or edited. One should have thought that no one who consults a book on the discovery of radium and the politics of the Belle Epoque need be told that "Mont-St.-Michel, a magnificent Benedictine Abbey dating back to the tenth century, perched at the apex of a jutting rock and surrounded completely by water when the tide is high, is one of the Western world's great marvels." Nor is it great news that *Boche* is an unkind French name for a German. Finally, it is impossible to make sense of physics without *some* resort to math! But perhaps Quinn's editors believe that those who limit their reading to books *by* women *about* women are accustomed to simplicity. I would argue that successful biographers such as Jean Strouse (*Alice James*) and Carolyn L. Karcher (*Lydia Maria Child*) contradict the notion that the politically correct are always factually challenged.

Ms. Quinn has written a book that is far better than the examples of dumb-speak I have quoted. Her biography is an assemblage of enough facts to remind us all that the character of science is not contingent on the characters of scientists. The story of Pierre and Marie Curie that Quinn has resurrected is a tribute to a dazzling set of discoveries jointly made by a man and a woman of genius. "L'art c'est moi; la science c'est nous" wrote Claude Bernard, and—feminist pleaders aside—that *nous* remains independent of gender, psychic baggage, or family romance. Among the photographs in this volume is a late one of an intense Marie Curie on the balcony of her Institute behind the Ecole normale. Her lined face

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looks forward to the future, her hands are scrumbled by the scars of radium; it's an image that sums up the hope and the harm of her discovery. She would have been pleased that she is shown overlooking the street that we now call the rue Pierre et Marie Curie (5ème).

Shorter notices

Maya Angelou
The Complete Collected Poems.
Random House, 273 pages, $23

When Maya Angelou, the poet laureate, read at the Clinton Inauguration, it was the first time a poet had done so since Robert Frost recited his poems at the Kennedy Inauguration over thirty years before. How times—and poets—have changed! If Frost was a national symbol misunderstood by a good many of his readers—he was not the genial celebrator of farm life he was made out to be—Maya Angelou is a national symbol quite fully comprehended, thank you very much, by her vast legion of admirers. What, after all, can possibly be misconstrued in the wish, as stated recently by Angelou on a television show, to "try . . . to find the likeness in us all"? What is there to misread in sentiments such as "In minor ways we differ,/ in major we're the same," sentiments which are never balanced by even the slightest contrary perception?

Whether chastising racist America ("the naked/ Black-White truth," as she calls it) or romanticizing distant Africa, there isn't a trace of an unexpected thought or feeling, never a hint of a vision beyond the clichés that now usually rule when anyone, black or white, discusses the issue of black identity. Not that Angelou refuses to criticize blacks; she does, but in an exceptionally odd manner, namely, by laying almost all the blame on black *men*—the junkies, wife-beaters, and child-abusers who inhabit the ghetto. Just about every woman of color, at least in Angelou's book, is above reproach and indeed almost worthy of sainthood. In one poem, a sassy black women—is she modeled on Angelou?—observes: "Does my sexiness upset you?" And elsewhere, Angelou writes: "Phenomenal woman,/ That's me." And: "Failure?/ I'm not ashamed to tell it,/ I never learned to spell it." Had Angelou's predecessor Robert Frost aggrandized himself or those he claimed to speak for in this way, he would have been rebuked faster than you can say "vanity" and "pride"; as it is, Frost is as unsentimental in his depiction of *his* people, the New England townsfolk and farmers he lived among, as one could possibly be.

Some poems here may be of use in a course on self-esteem but scarcely qualify as verse; and to claim one's task is to "find the likeness in us all," too, is more the goal of a solemn sociologist or a New Age shrink than a serious writer, especially one who is supposed to represent the nation. There is more to all of us than our racial identity, and poetry has more urgent tasks than to make one group of people, whichever it is, feel good about itself at the expense of the rest.

—*Robert Richman*

Gertrude Himmelfarb
The De-moralization of Society:
From Victorian Virtues to Modern Values.
Knopf, 314 pages, $24

The lurking modern presence which haunts Gertrude Himmelfarb's latest exploration of Victoriana is that of Margaret Thatcher, who coined the phrase "Victorian values" (as it is generally rendered) in the 1983 British general election campaign. Only Beatrice Webb and John Stuart Mill, each with one index citation more, are mentioned more often than the Iron Lady, and their claim to authority on the subject of Victorian virtues is rather better established. But the former prime minister represents to Miss Himmelfarb the hope that our de-moralized society might somehow be re-moralized along Victorian lines, and her recurring presence thus signals the author's polemical intent.

And why not? Miss Himmelfarb is a well-

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known authority on the Victorians (her books about the period include the monumental *Idea of Poverty: England in the Early Industrial Age*, published in 1984, and *Poverty and Compassion: The Moral Imagination of the Late Victorians*, published in 1991), and in her earlier works an obvious sympathy for Victorianism as well as Victorians has been constrained by the demands of scholarship. It is time that she cut loose—not because we would have her take a vacation from scholarship, but because we have need of polemics which are as convincingly informed by it as this one is.

After an introductory discussion of the social significances to be attributed to the shift from "virtues" to "values," Miss Himmelfarb launches into a masterly series of chapters on Victorian attitudes toward "manners and morals," to the family, to the position of women, to the poor, to charity and philanthropy, and, finally, to the Jews. Then there is a chapter on the changing ideas of sexual morality during Victoria's last decade, which "may be said to constitute the late-Victorian 'counterculture.'" Her final chapter on the breakdown of the Victorian consensus—which only became complete (with disastrous social results) in the 1960s—is followed by a brief postscript on why the puritans of political correctness do not deserve to be called "New Victorians."

Indeed, the book consistently celebrates those Victorian qualities which are least understood by the "New Victorians" but which ought most to recommend themselves to us—their tolerance, their democratic instincts, their passion for reform. Here there is no reticence about or apology for proposing the Old Victorians to us as models both of intellect and of conduct. Others (not least Mrs. Thatcher) have done the same, but no one hitherto has done it with such a breadth of learning and such a comprehensive understanding of just what it is that she is recommending.

For those who are skeptical about the virtue revival and above all the virtues of the Victorians, *The De-moralization of Society* will severely tax their ingenuity in raising informed objections; for those who are already in sympathy with it, the book will serve as both a useful and a delightful compendium of knowledge about the period, culled from lifelong study. Here you may learn in the author's enjoyably frequent asides that a writer for the *Lady Cyclist* in 1895 hailed the bicycle as the means by which women could meet "a new dawn, a dawn of emancipation," or that the motto of the penny paper *Woman*, of which Arnold Bennett was an assistant editor, was "Forward but not too fast." I especially liked the account of how Freud and Havelock Ellis managed to agree that the science of sex was often conducted by those who themselves suffered from sexual neuroses without being able to agree as to which of the two of *them* so suffered.

The book can only be faulted, I think, in being a bit more censorious of Wilde and the decadents than they quite deserve and, occasionally, in straining too much to rehabilitate the Victorians to late-twentieth-century sensibilities. It is easy to say, as Miss Himmelfarb does, that "no one, not even the most ardent 'virtue revivalist,' is proposing to revive" such things as excessively deferential children, or workers, or blacks, or women along with Victorianism. "Those 'good-old'/'bad-old' days are irrevocably gone," she avers. To me it is not quite so obvious as it seems to be to her that we can pick out for refurbishment and renewal only the good things of Victorianism and leave the bad ones alone. But it will be a long time before we see anyone make a better case than this one for the good.

—*James Bowman*

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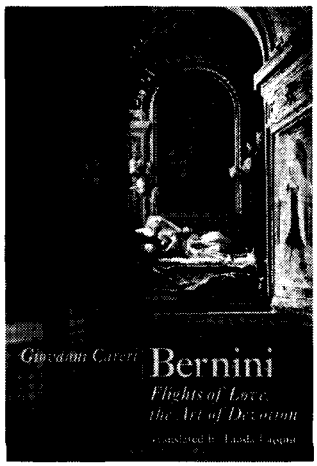

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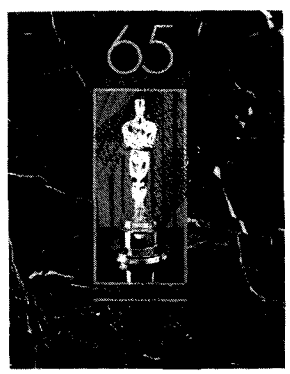

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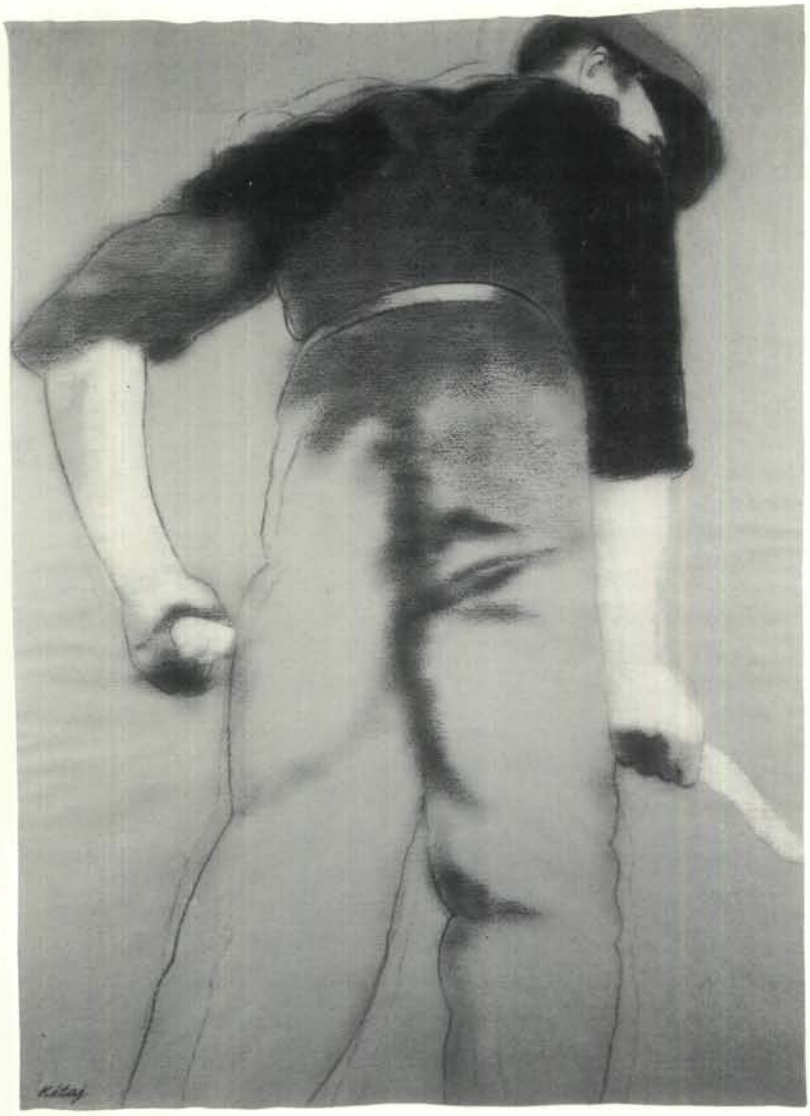

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